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Clever Minds and Nimble Hands? Making Embroidery in Late Qing and Republican China

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in History

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Abstract

The handiwork of embroidery signified gentry lady's intelligence and refinement in late imperial China. Yet in late Qing and Republican China, embroidery was practised by a wide range of makers – gentry ladies, male professionals, home-based female workers, young students, and peasant women. Why was the exquisite art of embroidery able to be crafted by makers of a diverse backgrounds? My study explores various contexts and investigates the secrets for the maintenance of the technical virtuosity of different embroidery genres and argues that the making of embroidery in late Qing and Republican China was a constantly changing knowledge redistribution process in the context of values, economy, and culture in fluidity.

My dissertation begins with a study of the stereotypical embroiderers in public perception – boudoir ladies in the late Qing. I borrow anthropologist Alfred Gell's concept of "technical excellence" to explain the dilemma associated with boudoir embroiderers: because embroidery was such a mysterious process for viewers that gentry embroiderers were regarded as occult technicians. On the one hand, they embodied female virtues pointing to a quiet, gentle, and self-disciplined woman; on the other hand, the glamour of an embroiderer rendered her invulnerable to male seduction, signifying eroticism and sexuality. The second chapter examines late Qing rank badges that were made in hierarchical social environments – workshops inside the Forbidden City, imperial workshops in Jiangnan, and regional commercial workshops. I explore how these badges were made by different modes of production and how they potentially affected the owners. Chapter Three expands to the investigation of commercial embroidery of nineteenth-century China where embroidery was a collaborative work by both genders. The leadership roles of men as middlemen, painters, and master embroiderers marginalized female workers who earned low wages embroidering at home. As Chapter Four enters Republican China, it uncovers

the history of embroidery reform led by female innovators who aimed at reclaiming the control over the entire process of embroidery from underdrawing to stitching. This reform took place in the context of adopting Western aesthetics and building Western market, reflecting Chinese perception of modernity in textile industry. Discussing another form of modernity in the next chapter, I focus on cross-stitch, the Western introduced technique supported by China's cheap labor and exported to the American market. Pattern books played a central role in the popularity of cross-stitch among young girls. My last chapter continues to investigate paper as medium delivering sophisticated painting knowledge, but in a different form – papercuts as stencils, which spread embroidery to uneducated peasant women.

Keywords

Chinese history; the Qing dynasty; Republican China; embroidery; women; textile; material culture; technical excellence

Summary for Lay Audience

This dissertation on the history of Chinese embroidery consists of six chapters, which are arranged both chronologically and thematically. The first three chapters focus on the late Qing period, the last on Republican China. As the chapters take an object-driven approach, each begins with the technical analysis of an embroidery item, or embroidery-related objects such as pattern books and papercuts. In addition to treating embroideries as primary sources, much of the data for the dissertation is drawn from local gazetteers, women's biographies, news articles, and magazines. The chapters delve into a wide range of issues including women's agency, the politics of embroidery, gender, technology, production, and the transnational flow commodities and artistic ideals.

Chapter One asks why, with the availability of ample commercially made embroidery products, late Qing gentry ladies chose to stitch? Chapter Two looks at imperial rank badges and asks whether the level of technical expertise used in producing badges was linked to the authority embodied in them. Chapter Three examines the commercial production and the distribution of embroideries in nineteenth-century China. Chapter Four inquires into the drastic decline of embroidery production in the early twentieth century and considers the measures that reformers took to modernize embroidery and established it as a respected art form. Chapter Five studies the growing popularity of the cross-stitch embroidery technique and its ties to the American missionary movement. In the last chapter, papercut is examined as a patterning method that helped to popularize embroidery, particularly among village women.

Acknowledgments

Upon my arrival in London, Ontario in the autumn of 2017, the captivating display of colourful foliage immediately caught my attention. Inspired by this beauty, I embarked on a research journey centered around one of the most visually striking forms of textile art - embroidery. In a similar vein, my supervisor, Professor James Flath, found his interest piqued by colourful paper, namely Chinese woodblock prints. Throughout my doctoral journey, Professor Flath expertly guided me, revealing the striking parallels between various artistic mediums and their impressive interplay. Under his guidance, I navigated the intricate path of my dissertation writing, where he invested boundless effort, time, and energy into refining multiple versions of my draft. My heart overflows with gratitude for his invaluable support and instructions.

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Introduction

In the third year of the Guangxu reign (1875-1908) of the Qing dynasty, *Shanhuaxian zhi* 善化縣志 was engraved. This local gazetteer documented important features and customs of Shanhua, a region in the south periphery of modern Changsha, the capital of Hunan province. The gazetteer criticized the luxury trending among women in the provincial capital: “Many (women) embroider in the capital ... (They) mostly dress up in fashionable ways to follow and surpass their forerunners, which fails in acting in the (proper) manner of educated families.”¹ In the same year, another local gazetteer, *Chuanshating zhi* 川沙廳志 was engraved a thousand kilometers away in the Lower Yangzi Region, acclaiming local poor women’s endurance of hardship: “After having done housework, (women) either weave and embroider or aid in feeding the men in the field, reaping, and waterwheel irrigation – (women) work with men. Although (they) endure more hardship than that of people in other counties, both men and women are capable of supporting themselves.”² These two late Qing gazetteers held opposing views toward embroidery as one associated embroidery with luxury and the other regarded embroidery as hard labor conducted by industrious commoners. This contrast was not simply a result of regional discrepancy. In late imperial China, contrasting views towards embroidery were ubiquitous.

The ambiguous status of embroidery had ancient roots. In the precious silk-based decoration of the early Zhou period, embroidery was highlighted for its ceremonial importance

¹ The original text reads: “省會工刺繡者多...服飾多從時尚，踵事增華，反失方家舉止,” in *Guangxu Shanhuaxian zhi* Vol. 16 (1877), 1116-17, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Multiple Qing gazetteers describe women’s luxurious and fashionable dress in the capital of Hunan supported by local embroidery practice. See *Qianlong Huanan tongzhi* Vol. 49 (1756), 3223, *Jiaqing Changshaxian zhi* Vol. *fengtu* 風土 (1810), 1252, and *Tongzhi Changshaxian zhi* Vol. 16 (1870), 1118, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

² The original text reads: “井日餘，紡織刺繡，或佐耕鑿耘穫車灌，與男子共事。勞苦雖踰他邑，男女皆能自食其力,” in *Guangxu Chuanshating zhi* Vol. 1 (1879), 65, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

as an embodiment of the king's authority in early accounts such as *Shangshu* 尚書 and *Zhouli* 周禮.³ In the later years of Zhou, however, as the ritual authority of the kings weakened, embroidery came to be abused by newly fledged hegemony. As the *Liji* 禮記 states: “the axes embroidered on the inner garment with its vermilion colour - these were usurpations of the Great officers.”⁴ This sentiment was echoed in numerous later texts. In 142 BC, for example, an edict from Emperor Jing of the Han dynasty posited embroidery as the opposite of women's virtue: “carved ornaments and chiseled engravings are matters that injure agriculture. Brocade, embroidery, vermillion silk ribbons and braided ribbons harm women's work.”⁵ Eastern Han historian Ban Gu explicitly praised the unembellished curtains of the concubine of Emperor Wen as a sign of frugality.⁶ In a widely cited case from the Tang dynasty, Empress Wu (r. 690-705) was harshly criticized for gifting embroidered robes to her subordinates.⁷

³ *Shangshu* describes that: “the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountain, the dragons, and the flowery fowl (the pheasant), which are depicted (on the upper garment); the temple cups, the pondweed, the flames, the grains of rice, the hatchet, and the symbol of distinction, which are embroidered (on the lower garment). (I wish to see all these) fully displayed in the five colours, so as to form the ceremonial robes. It is yours to see them clearly (for me). 日、月、星辰、山、龍、華蟲作會; 宗彝、藻、火、粉米、黼、黻, 絺繡, 以五采彰施于五色, 作服, 汝明.” See “The Shoo King, Part II,” in *The Chinese Classics: with a Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes*, Vol. III-Part. I. Trans. James Legge (Hong Kong; London: Trübner & Co., Go, Paternoster Row, 1865), 80-81. In *Zhouli*, colours were closely associated with cardinal directions, the order of the land, which were presented via the vehicle of embroidery. “The east corresponds to colour blue, the south to red, the west to white, the north to black. Heaven is red-in-black, and earth is yellow. When five colours are all ready, it is called embroidery. 東方謂之青, 南方謂之赤, 西方謂之白, 北方謂之黑, 天謂之玄, 地謂之黃...五采備謂之繡.” In Chen Shuguo annotated, *Zhouli Yili Liji* (Changsha: yuelu shushe, 2006), 104. Translated by the author.

⁴ The original text reads “繡黼, 丹朱中衣, 大夫之僭禮也.” English translation from *Li Chi Book of Rites: An Encyclopedia of Ancient Ceremonial Usages, Religious Creeds, and Social Institutions*, Vol. I. Trans. James Legge (New York: University Books, 1967), 422.

⁵ The original text goes: “雕文刻鏤, 傷農事者也; 錦繡纂組, 害女紅者也。農事傷則飢之本也, 女紅害則寒之原也。” The translation is adopted from Homer Dubs' version. See Pan Ku, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty*. Volume One, First Division: The Imperial Annals, Chapters I- V. Trans. Homer H. Dubs (Baltimore: Waverly Press, 1938), 328.

⁶ Ban Gu, *Hanshu* Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 134.

⁷ Ou Yangxiu and Song Qi, *Xin tangshu* Vol 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 529.

The implication of these pronouncements is that whereas the ruling class praised women's textile making as virtuous "womanly work" (*nügong* 女紅), embroidery had become a sign of immoral extravagance that took channeled resources away from more essential forms of labour. Further, Angela Sheng explains with respect to the Tang dynasty that plain weaving was a significant form of tax revenue, but embroidery was too luxurious to fix its price or occupy a market niche, and therefore created no monetary value.⁸ For these reasons, weaving was promoted by Confucian scholars as the embodiment of disciplined, diligent women from court to local who contributed to home and country economically and morally.⁹ Embroidery, meanwhile, if not condemned, then was at least minimized, discouraged, or made silent in moralist doctrines.¹⁰

The Tang-Song Transition initiated a new social-economic environment, in which embroidery's negative associations started to change.¹¹ As noted by Xu Jia, the maturity of painting in realistic style stimulated Song embroidery to transform from functional decorations to a form of art in its own right known as "embroidered painting" (*xiuhua* 繡畫).¹² Actively engaged in by gentry ladies, especially Jiangnan residents who enjoyed economic and cultural

⁸ Angela Sheng argues that because complex and embroidered textiles were rare and prestigious, they often failed in functioning as a universal medium of exchange. Simple silks, on the other hand, presented stability of value and was a means of exchange. See Angela Sheng, "Determining the Value of Textiles in the Tang Dynasty: In Memory of Professor Denis Twitchett (1925-2006)," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23 (2): 175-95.

⁹ See Hinsch's discussion on cloth making as a highly symbolic, virtuous female activity in early China. Hinsch, Bret, "Textiles and Female Virtue in Early Imperial Chinese Historical Writing," *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 5 (2), 2003: 170-202.

¹⁰ Note that although Sinologist Homer Dubs translated *nügong* as "women's work", "womanly work" as the English equivalent of *nügong* is preferred by historians conducting gender studies, including three important figures Francesca Bray, Susan Mann, and Dorothy Ko. Francesca Bray frames "womanly work" to refer to women's textile contribution while "women's work" simply denotes any type of work conducted by women including various family chores and productions. See Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 246-247; 255-257.

¹¹ The "Tang-Song Transition" is widely acknowledged as a significant political and economic turning point of Imperial China. For a succinct introduction, see Nicolas Tackett, "A Tang-Song Turning Point," in *A Companion to Chinese History*, ed. Michael Szonyi (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 125-26.

¹² Xu Jia, "Xiuhua: Zhongguo Jiangnan chuantong cixiu yanjiu." (PhD diss., China Academy of Art, 2016), 13-14.

advantages, embroidery became a realm for their artistic pursuit and self-expression alongside poetry and painting. The later Gu family in Ming dynasty Shanghai was best known for embroidery creation that pleased the elite circle and helped build the family's social ties.¹³ Embroidery thus constructed the cultural identity of boudoir ladies and earned them recognition from both male and female audiences. It was in this context that the female skill of embroidery came to be associated with intelligence and agility.

The following late Qing and early Republican China were periods with the most dramatic transformations for embroidery. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, Qing promotion of sericulture, women's disadvantages in the weaving business, and specializations in the textile industry would eventually contribute to the popularity of embroidery outside the elite circles. Commercial workshops and organizations recruited male and female embroiderers from diverse backgrounds. Embroidery experienced waves of technical innovation in stitches and styles, which continued to evolve in Republican China. Embraced by a broad range of social groups, embroidery was situated at the crossroad responding to conventional moral charges and new domestic and international capital, ideas, and markets. There was a deep divide over the meaning of embroidery. What embroidery meant varied significantly depending on the region, time, and individual.

My dissertation focuses on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and asks how embroidery became so popular among various groups at that time. My study considers "making" to be essential for understanding various emerging genres of embroidery within diverse social contexts. I choose "making" as the focus of my dissertation other than "technology" because in modern academia, "technology" is often used as an umbrella term referring to a wide range of

¹³ I-Fen Huang, "Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 36 (2012): 77–129.

processes that can be natural, manual, mechanized, or high-tech involved.¹⁴ Moreover, “making” as an action word suggests the process of production with the involvement of people. Current material culture studies generally agree that the “doing and making” of things is involved in larger “modes of organization” and “networks.”¹⁵ I explore the making process of embroidery in order to understand the social relations of embroidery during the late-Qing and Republican eras and explain how and why embroidery became so popular in such a short time span. Before the Qing dynasty, embroidery was a technology apprehended by the very few. Expensive materials, ample time, and the high level of difficulty conspired to preserve embroidery as an activity mostly practiced by those with clever minds, nimble hands, and family wealth.¹⁶ Thus, when gentry ladies in late imperial China took up this handiwork, it became a notable identity marker associated with their cultural status. As Francesca Bray explains: “for fine work one needed fingers so smooth they would not snag the silk, so rough work and fine embroidery were incompatible.”¹⁷ However, during late Qing and Republican China, embroidery came to be practiced by men and women from all social classes, many of whom were rough-handed peasants stitching during their spare time. If the boudoir privilege of “clever minds and nimble hands” was no longer a prerequisite for embroidery, then what was required? This quick transition presented a technical mystery concerning the making of embroidery – how was the

¹⁴ For example, Bray broadens the concept of “technology” to consider “technological systems”, and she argues that, for instance, childbearing and motherhood as reproductive technologies. See Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 15, 275-82.

¹⁵ Ludovic Coupaye, “Technology,” in L. De Cunzo and C. Roeber edited, *The Cambridge Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 439.

¹⁶ It should be noted that even though embroidery served as an identity marker for gentry ladies in late imperial China, it was never a practice exclusively reserved for women or the educated. Although embroidery became popularized during the Qing dynasty, pre-Qing accounts occasionally recorded talented individuals from poverty, ordinary women in silk centers, or soldiers embroidered. A Ming source describes that, in order to occupy fugitive soldiers, the military dispatched various tasks including embroidery. See Zhang Xuan, *Xiyuan Jianwenlu*, Vol. 64, 2402, in *Xuxiu Siku quanshu*.

¹⁷ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 266-267.

technical difficulty solved? My study will analyze various technological steps needed for making embroidery, namely pattern designing, underdrawing, thread dying, and stitching. I suggest that these steps were sometimes completed by a single person and, at other times, were finished by collaborative work. It was thus the distribution and redistribution of specific knowledge fields involved in embroidery technology, which went hand in hand with changing human relations, structuring workshops and organizations, and a developing commercial network that made embroidery popular.

Literature Review

Chinese embroidery lies at the intersection of art history, material culture, gender history, and the history of science, technology, and economics, and thus offers a unique perspective on women in pre-modern China. Because embroidery was also practiced by men, the practice provides valuable insight into gender roles and relationships. In academia, however, embroidery has attracted little attention. This deficit is partially due to the ambiguous quality of embroidery – not quite art, not quite textile, and not quite text. Moreover, the study of embroidery is made difficult by the fact that it relies on non-textual and fragmentary primary sources, as well as a specialized knowledge of textile technology.

In recent scholarship, most detailed accounts represent Chinese embroidery as a form of textile art, typically found in museum collections.¹⁸ For historians, embroidery is most often interpreted as gendered work, and treated as a supplement to our general understanding of women's pasts. In three important 1990s works discussing Chinese women of late imperial China, Francesca Bray, Susan Mann, and Dorothy Ko each argued that embroidery was primarily

¹⁸ For example, see James Watt and Anne Wardwell, *When Silk Was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art in cooperation with the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1997).

a privilege enjoyed by elite women, while also acknowledging the role of lower-income women who assisted in stitching for the wealthy.¹⁹ However, their research on embroidery was incomplete and fragmented without considering it as an independent subject.

Historians only began to treat embroidery as a subject in its own right in the 2000s. Grace Fong's 2004 in-depth study contended that embroidery constituted a field of knowledge for educated women that was comparable to male literacy.²⁰ In 2012, I-fen Huang discussed the famous Gu family embroidery of the Ming dynasty, examining its artistic values and technical innovations. Huang argues that the Gu family contributed not only to their family finances but also to the art and culture of late Ming Shanghai with new techniques such as "splitting silk threads into finer filaments, using new colour combinations, and inventing new stitches."²¹ In contrast, Yuhang Li explores the phenomenon of embroidering Buddhist portraits using hair and redefines embroidery as a form of religious devotion.²² Dorothy Ko's 2009 study of Shen Shou 沈壽, a significant Republican contributor to embroidery reform and export, reveals how complex domestic and international markets were entangled with China's transition and modernization during the Republican era.²³ Certainly the most thorough study of Chinese embroidery to date is Rachel Silberstein's recent monograph. In this study Silberstein challenges the conventional approach that associates embroidery with female social elites and directs

¹⁹ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 266-269; Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997), 159-60; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), 175-76.

²⁰ Grace S. Fong, "Female Hands: Embroidery as a Knowledge Field in Women's Everyday Life in Late Imperial and Early Republican China," *Late Imperial China* 25, no. 1 (2004): 1-58.

²¹ I-Fen Huang, "Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 36 (2012): 81.

²² Yuhang Li, "Embroidering Guanyin: Constructions of the Divine through Hair," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 36 (2012): 131-66.

²³ Dorothy Ko, "Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace: Shen Shou, Embroidery and Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," in *Looking Modern: East Asian Visual Culture from Treaty Ports to World War II*, edited by Jennifer Purtle and Hans Thomsen (Chicago: Center for the Arts of East Asia, 2009), 38-61.

attention to lower-class men and women who worked as professional embroiderers. Through her in-depth analysis of the late Qing's fashion system, she argues that late Qing embroidery was driven by market demands and a fashion-conscious mindset.²⁴ Silberstein's study is insightful also for rejecting the academic bias viewing the late Qing as a "period of fast-declining taste."²⁵ By moving away from an elite-exclusive perspective, she redefines the nineteenth century as a mass production golden age for embroidery.

The analyses on the transition of traditional technology by social historians provide further insights. Particularly, Eyferth's study of a papermaking community in twentieth-century rural Sichuan demonstrates the "redistribution of skill, knowledge, and technical control" in an age of transformation.²⁶ In Eyferth's case, state interference was important in transferring skills from women to men, and from peasants to elites in the second half of the twentieth century. Although this state directed transformation does not apply to embroidery of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Eyferth's analysis of how social relations were bridged via technology and skill is illuminating for my study. I contend that, similarly, embroidery in late Qing and Republican China underwent several stages of skill and knowledge redistribution, as well as technical control, in response to a rapidly changing environment, leading to its constant reshaping and reconstruction.

²⁴ Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020) Early Western academics, in contrast, regarded fashion a particular phenomenon existed only in Western societies and did not view premodern China as having a fashion system. For further discussion of this point, see Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 6-10.

²⁵ Schuyler Cammann, "Embroidery Techniques in Old China," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, Vol. 16 (1962), 34.

²⁶ Jacob Eyferth, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920-2000* (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 2.

Contribution and Significance

My dissertation draws from anthropologists' understanding of how technology and social relations are intertwined. As Alfred Gell explains, artworks become artworks not because they are beautifully made or aesthetically pleasing, but because the applied technology transcends our understanding. We admire artworks because we cannot create them. Gell argues that this technical mystery casts a "halo" onto the artwork and its maker, the "occult technician", creating hierarchical relations between individuals based on their relations to the object.²⁷ Gell's theory has received criticism for its limited scope. One of his harshest critics, Ross Bowden, points out that Gell's analysis of the enchantment of technology is "not limited to artwork" and thus does not distinguish art objects from other entities.²⁸ Yet for the same reason, Gell's theory is a good fit for embroidery, which shifts between art, applied art, and handiwork. Moreover, since Gell identifies the hierarchical systems built upon objects, the theory provides guidance in breaking down the technical process for an analysis of social relations. In this dissertation, I have no intention to reject the artistic values of embroidery, but the focus on specific techniques enables me to consider how skills structured social relationships during a period when the aesthetic definition of embroidery varied significantly.

Therefore, the technology of embroidery analyzed in my dissertation is essentially social. As will be discussed in my first chapter, embroidery made by gentry ladies presented an enigma for the viewers, many of whom were male elites, who marveled at their painting-like handiwork. When the lower-class accessed embroidery, I argue, it was the specialization and redistribution of skills that simplified the exquisite art of embroidery and transformed it into a collaborative

²⁷ Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, edited by J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 40-67.

²⁸ Ross Bowden, "A Critique of Alfred Gell on *Art and Agency*," *Oceania* 2004, 74 (4): 323.

work. When different groups undertook specialized jobs respectively, a hierarchy was established reflecting their position in the social network centering on embroidery. I further argue that it was the skill of pattern designing, rather than stitching, that stood at the pinnacle of the decentralized embroidery creation. Pattern designing was a skill grounded in one's ability to draw, which was a form of cultivation less available to lower-class women, and which, unlike stitching, could be polished through self-learning and practice. The making of embroidery from the late Qing to Republican China was thus a constantly changing process of knowledge distribution and redistribution, defining and redefining one's position in the technical hierarchy and one's relations to others. Situated at the core of embroidery technology, pattern designing was controlled by certain groups, for example gentry ladies, professional male painter, and embroidery reformers, or made available via mediums, such as pattern books and papercut templates.

The history of Chinese embroidery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thus was firstly a process of deciphering the secret of embroidery to make it accessible. When embroidery was created by a gentry lady, the artwork was produced through technical steps that were unintelligible to onlookers, and thus achieved a "technical miracle".²⁹ To alleviate technical difficulties, workshops were organized to specialize in collaborative work, and patterning tools were introduced to assist home embroiderers. The rise and popularity of various local commercial brands, cross-stitch, and folk embroidery were inseparable from the continuous lowering of the technical difficulty. To a certain extent, this technological accessibility likewise resulted in the production of modularized items that withered the "uniqueness" of gentry embroidery, a premodern cultural phenomenon that Walter Benjamin coined as "aura" in his

²⁹ Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," 49.

argument.³⁰ As a concept similar to, yet different from Gell's "halo", Benjamin's "aura" helps to explain the cultural transformation from gentry embroidery to commercial embroidery.

Embroidery also comprises a history of gender tensions. In her discussion of silk production, Bray outlines the decline of the status of women weavers, who were displaced from their jobs by better skilled and specialized male weavers as early as late Ming.³¹ Through participation in the embroidery industry, Qing women attempted to increase their economic contribution to both the household and society. However, as this dissertation will demonstrate, women's roles were again marginalized by men's involvement. When gentry ladies created an artwork of embroidery, they controlled the entire process from painting to stitching. In the commercial workshop, however, painting was dominated by hired male professionals, who dispatched piecework to women embroiderers. Male workers further contributed to this marginalization by stitching large garments and hangings with expensive materials collectively, leaving only small pieces for stay-at-home seasonal women embroiderers. In this respect, the embroidery reform during Republican China was a movement led by female artists to regain the full control over embroidery by mastering updated painting knowledge.

Lastly, the history of Chinese embroidery in this transitional period was a history of different responses to a world that tended to be modern. Like other industries that had developed into specializations in the late Qing, commercial embroidery may be seen as a sign of proto industrialization. However, China's embroidery industry was soon impacted by imported fashion trends that favored plainer, more subdued clothing over fully embellished garments. Suddenly, embroidery was strongly associated with backwardness, and reformers were challenged to

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Sheila Watson, Amy Jane Barnes, and Katy Bunning ed., *A Museum Studies Approach to Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 229.

³¹ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 226-36.

embrace modernity by creating “lifelike embroidery.” These embroiderers utilized painting knowledge to create scientifically and realistically depicted objects, incorporated synthetic dyes and innovative stitching techniques to capture details and achieve vivid visual effects. Moreover, targeting the high-end international market brought Chinese embroidery closer to the global economy. Unfortunately, international discrepancies in the understanding of “modernity”, as will be explained in the fourth chapter, eventually limited success to only a few leading figures, while most schools and programs in this movement came to an end rather quickly.

A more successful sector of the embroidery industry was the household textile business run by foreigners, especially American missionaries, who helped to develop the United States as China’s largest market. Tablecloths, luncheon sets, sheets decorated with cross-stitch, lace, and drawnwork made by Chinese workers were so popular in American homes that China became one of the biggest suppliers for American household textiles. The contrast of lifelike embroidery and cross-stitch reflected the discrepancy in the understanding of embroidery modernity. Cross-stitch embroidery was nothing new in the eyes of Chinese embroidery reformers – production was based on established networks of peasant women, the designing and colouring were traditional, and the stitches were rather simple and even coarse. Yet these small items with intricate designs and contrasting colours helped to define the modern American home.

Structure

My dissertation consists of six chapters, which are arranged both chronologically and thematically. While the first three chapters focus on the late Qing period, the rest center on Republican China. As my writing takes an object-driven approach, each chapter begins with the technical analysis of an embroidery, or an embroidery-related object, which prompts research

questions and suggests broader implications. The observation of objects, mostly embroideries, as well as pattern books and papercuts, is central to my study. The Textile Museum of Canada and Royal Ontario Museum were major repositories where the stitches and textile structures of many pieces were examined. Textual sources were equally important for my writing. In an effort to approach this history from the bottom up, women's biographies and news articles are important in reconstructing the past. Local gazetteers constitute a major source base for the Qing era, whilst the study of the Republican period relies largely on newspapers and magazines.

In my dissertation, the history of embroidery starts with the examination of the archetypal boudoir embroiderer. Entitled "Enchanted Technology and Occult Technicians", Chapter One asks why, with the availability of ample commercially made embroidery products, late Qing gentry ladies chose to stitch. By studying the embroidery artworks, late Qing women's accounts, and commentary from male elites, Chapter One argues that it was the making process of embroidery, rather than economic or aesthetic value, that signified educated, deft-handed, obedient, and disciplined women. Moreover, this chapter explains the ambivalent status of embroidery by considering the impact of technology. It further argues that it was the mysterious process and the level of difficulty that made gentry embroiderers occult technicians in the eyes of male audience, who either viewed them with awe or fantasized over them.

Moving away from gentry women, the second chapter "Rank Badges: The Making of Authority" discusses a specific type of politically significant embroidery commonly worn by male elites. In this chapter, the question is raised as to whether the level of technical expertise used in producing late Qing rank badges was linked to the authority embodied in each individual badge, given that these badges were created in various settings and with varying levels of skill. Chapter Two will contend that the creation of each individual rank badge during the late Qing

period involved a negotiation between imperial authority and budgetary constraints. Imperial workshops utilized materials of the highest quality, enforced strict supervision, and employed highly specialized professionals to ensure the legitimacy of officialdom through the production of top-quality badges. In contrast, commercially produced rank badges offered greater flexibility to meet the preferences, budget constraints, and other needs of customers. Furthermore, it could be argued that the utilization, misappropriation, and repurposing of rank badges during the late Qing period played a crucial role in shaping social relationships and influencing how the wearer was perceived by onlookers.

Chapter Three, “A Business for Women, Led by Men”, offers an overview of late Qing embroidery workshops and commerce networks and explores how an intricate product was made through the collaborative efforts of various participants. This chapter first analyzes the moral discourse on poor women’s embroidering and discovers that, although Qing scholars retained an ambivalent attitude toward embroidery, they were less critical of regions where weaving was impractical. The chapter then delves into the late Qing embroidery industry and argues that the most challenging task of pattern design was monopolized by male painters, who played a pivotal role in deciphering elite knowledge. Moreover, men held crucial positions in the embroidery business, serving as managers, negotiators, middlemen, and, in some cases, even as master embroiderers, while marginalized and often confined to their homes, women were frequently relegated to piecework.

As Chapter Four enters the Republican era, it points out the drastic decline that Chinese embroidery faced and studies the measures that reformers took to modernize the technology and industry. As suggested by the title – “Embroidery is One Type of Fine Arts”: The Making of Art and Artists – embroidery reformers launched a movement transforming the technology into a

high-end art and representing embroiderers as artists. To please their targeted international customers, embroiderers applied Western painting knowledge, coloured threads with synthetic dyes, and innovated stitching to imbue their artworks with an "aura" that would appeal to both Eastern and Western buyers. This movement, despite gaining international recognition for a few exceptional embroiderers, faced various challenges and experienced a rapid decline.

In Chapter Five “America and Shanghai: Cross-Stitch Popularity”, household linen embellished with cross-stitch is discussed for its popularity in both American and Chinese cities, led by Shanghai. Cross-stitch household linen refers to decorative textiles, mostly tablecloths, luncheon sets, and beddings that were embroidered with patterns in cross-stitches. This technology was introduced to China mostly by American missionaries, produced by Chinese peasant women, and sold to American housewives, which quickly grew into a significant industrial sector that generated substantial profits. This chapter argues that the design, which imitated European styles and was overseen by compradors, was important in determining the quality and success of the embroidery products. It is further argued that cross-stitch pattern book issued by Shanghai publishing houses, for instance, Mei Hwa 美華, played a crucial role in promoting the trend of self-making cross-stitch household items to chic city girls across China.

In the last chapter “Papercuts and Peasant Embroidery”, papercut is examined as a patterning method that helped to popularize embroidery, particularly among village women. This chapter argues that papercut as a patterning tool for embroidery solved the most daunting process in embroidering – underdrawing. Taking Tianjin’s papercut studio Jinbao Zhai 進寶齋 as case study, I explain how papercuts were created with the innovative method of carving, how wholesalers and peddlers approached customers by different means, and how guilds and apprenticeships encouraged the sharing of designs. This chapter argues that papercuts were

designed with a mechanism that allowed for convenient reproduction and reinvention. In addition, home-based embroiderers could purchase papercut designs and use them as inspiration for their own creations, incorporating the designs into their work.

In summary, this dissertation examines how embroidery was made in late Qing and Republican China. As the title suggests, “clever minds and nimble hands” became less a necessity in creating the artwork of embroidery, and collaborative work and easily accessible patterning methods redefined embroidery as a non-elite product. The technological developments of embroidery further reflected shifts in human relations and changing gender roles during a transformative time. A series of hierarchical relations were formed: boudoir embroiderers and woman artists to onlookers, pattern designers to users, and managers to workers. Men and women experienced their engagement with embroidery differently. While men controlled crucial sections of the industry as managers, pattern designers, and master embroiderers, women claimed their proactivity and connected to the outside world via handiworks whenever possible.

Chapter One

Enchanted Technology and Occult Technicians

A Homemade Pouch

During the Qing dynasty it was fashionable to adorn oneself liberally with purses. Purses in various shapes and sizes were made for keeping specific items, for example, *dalian hebao* 褡裢荷包 were for valuables, *yan hebao* 煙荷包 for tobacco, *shan tao* 扇套 for fans, *yaoshi tao* 鑰匙套 for keys, and pouches (or *xiangnang* 香囊) for fragrant substances.³² Among them, pouches were the least practical in that they were only capable of carrying no more than a pinch of aromatics. However, they were the most popular type of Qing purses and now can be found in museums all over the world.

The beginning of this chapter examines a pouch (figure 1.1) that is kept in the Textile Museum of Canada (hereafter TMC), which is highly likely made by a woman who belonged to the elite circle. Its elegance aligns well with the public perception of pre-modern Chinese embroidery – boudoir handiwork and high culture. In an oval shape, the pouch can be opened and closed from the top by green drawstrings. Smooth, shimmering satin fabrics constitute the base of the front and back of the pouch, which are chosen in contrasting colours – one side in dark brown and the other in creamy white. Flower patterns decorate both sides, accompanied with short verse in an elegant *zhuan* 篆 style,³³ which all together describe certain activities in four different seasons:

³² *Dalian hebao* were made in rectangle shapes and can be folded over. While men hung purses over their girdles, women wore them on the top button of the jacket. For an introduction to nineteenth century purses, see Valery Garrett, *Chinese Dress: from the Qing Dynasty to the Present* (Tokyo; Rutland, Vermont; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2007), 88-91. Also see Wang Jinhua, *Zhongguo chuantong fushi: Xiu hebao* (Beijing: Zhongguo fangzhi chubanshe, 2015) for a varied collection of purses.

³³ The *zhuan* style as a calligraphy front was commonly used in the pre-Qin times. However, during the Qing dynasty, especially after Qianlong reign, *zhuan* style revived in the calligraphy circle and appeared as art on various

春遊芳草地 Visit fragrant lawns in the spring;

夏賞綠荷池 enjoy the pond with green lotus flowers in the summer.

秋飲黃花酒 Taste *huanghua* liquor in the fall;

冬吟白雪詩 recite poems about the white snow in the winter.

These four sentences are taken from a poetry collection, *Shentong shi* 神童詩 (“Poems of Child Prodigies”), which is attributed to the Northern Song scholar Wang Zhu 汪洙, and which served as a popular elementary primer during the late imperial period.³⁴



Figure 1.1 The two sides of a pouch (accession No. T00.51.26). Photographed by the author. Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

Many components of this pouch signify the elite culture (figure 1.2). The combination of flower patterns and poem resembles the literati *tihuashi* 題畫詩 tradition.³⁵ The seasonal rhythm

types of materials, such as fans and stelae. For an in-depth study of *zhuan* style in the Qing dynasty, see Dong Wenqiang, “Qingdai xueshu yu zhuan shu fazhan” (PhD diss., Shandong University, 2017).

³⁴ The worship of child prodigies was inseparable from the civil examination system that started to formalize in the Song dynasty. For more about Wang Zhu and *shentong shi*, see Ma Xiujuan, “Songdai de shentong yu shentong shi,” in *Zhongguo dianji yu wenhua* 1992, (03): 55-60 and Wang Shengduo, “Wangzhu ji Shentong shi kaobian,” in *Zhongguo dianji yu wenhua* 2003, (02): 85-87.

³⁵ *Tihuashi*, painting with inscribed poetry, is a common form of literature and artistic creation seen in the Chinese literati circle. Although its origin was highly debated, the extant *tihuashi* are mostly from the late imperial period. See Dongfang Qiao, “Tihuashi yuanliu kaobian,” *Hebei xuekan* 2002 Vol. 22, No. 4: 97-100.

of the poem matches the floral patterns – lotus flowers on the light side and plum blossoms on the dark side – which are typical plants representing summer and winter respectively. The colour choices for various parts of the entire embroidery are distinct yet harmonious, the overall visual effect of the pouch, the chosen fabrics, *zhuan* font, and the stitch, along with the simplicity of the decorated agate stone pendants, suggest elegance and refinement. Most importantly, the stitches that resemble a seal distinctly identify the embroiderer as Shiquan 石泉, an alias that originated



Figure 1.2 (From top left to bottom right) Some details of the pouch: lotus flower pattern, the embroiderer's seal “石泉”, an agate stone pendant on one side of the pouch, and plum blossoms. Photographed by the author.

Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

from pre-Qin classics denoting spring water passing through mountain rocks.³⁶ Overall, the TMC pouch displays a carefully designed, genteel artefact as an ideal embodiment of elite women's intelligence.

This pouch, although visually elegant, implies a sensual relationship between different sexes since, as discussed by Susan Mann, the sensual scene of women embroidering was found in paintings implying erotism.³⁷ According to the shape of the pouch, it was most likely made for a male as oval-shaped pouches were usually worn by men.³⁸ The pouch, gifted to a man from a woman, built a material connection between female hands and male body. It was thus embedded with expectation for affection and a claim of a private space close to the recipient's body. The embroidered poem further indicated a status-specific connection based on literary education received by both genders. The verse connected the gifter and the giftee by a shared understanding of the poem that depicted an idealized, romantic lifestyle.

The date of the TMC pouch further complicates our understanding of the environment in which boudoir embroidery was situated. The entire piece was done in *lasuo xiu* 拉鎖繡 (lock stitch, figure 1.3), which was only popularized in the late Qing period.³⁹ As the TMC database

³⁶ Seals in Chinese painting and calligraphy are usually divided into two categories – *mingzhang* 名章, indicating author's identification and *xianzhang* 閒章, implying author's interest and motto. This is possibly an alias of the embroiderer. The classical allusion of *shiquan* was derived from Qu Yuan's 屈原 poem "He drinks from a spring amid the rocks, He shelters under cypress and pine (饮石泉兮荫松柏)," in "The Mountain Spirit 山鬼," in Arthur Waley translated and commented, *The Nine Songs: A Study of Shamanism in Ancient China* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1956), 53

³⁷ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997), 159-62.

³⁸ Collector Jinhua Wang concludes that Qing pouches in oval shapes were for male use and heart-shaped ones were for females. See Jinhua Wang, *Zhongguo chuantong fushi: xiu hebao*, 206. However, according to the Qing imperial collection, in a few cases men's pouches were designed in heart shapes as well. For an example see Zhang Qiuping and Yuan Xiaoli ed, *Zhongguo sheji quanji* Vol. 6, *fushi lei bian: guanlü pian* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2012), 286. Nonetheless, according to Wang's observation, the size of this pouch (12.8 cm) belongs to the spectrum of men's range of 9-13 cm.

³⁹ For a brief history about *lasuo xiu*, see Li Yulai and Li Yufang, *Ming Qing xiupin* (Shanghai: Donghua daxue chubanshe, 2015), 87 and Li Yulai, Li Yufang, *Zhongguo chuanshi ming xiupin shilu yanjiu* (Shanghai: Donghua daxue chubanshe, 2017), 111. For the technical description about *lasuo xiu* or *lasuo zi*, see Dieter Kuhn and Zhao Feng, ed., *Chinese Silks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 479.

narrows the date of this item to the last two decades of the Qing dynasty between 1890 and 1910,⁴⁰ a clearer image about the context is yielded – boudoir embroidery was situated in an environment where the practice of embroidery had already been embraced by all social classes and both genders. In her doctoral dissertation, Rachel Silberstein depicts a highly commercialized nineteenth-century China where all sorts of embroideries were produced by male and female professionals. Highly specialized embroidery workshops were popular in cities, and fabric stores and tailors supported a sophisticated fashion network.⁴¹

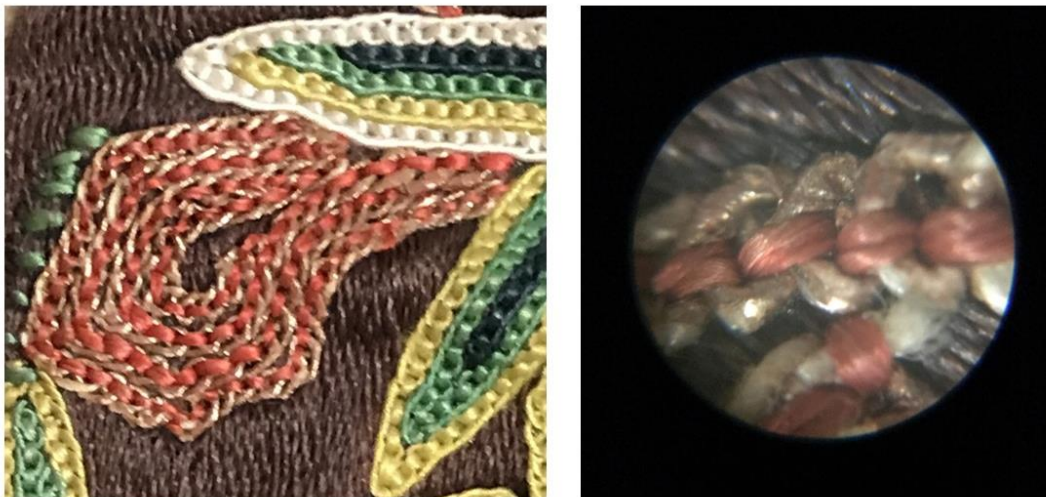


Figure 1.3 Partial pattern of the pouch finished in lock stitches and the microscopic view of the stitch. Photographed by the author. Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada. The lock stitch requires proficiency and attention as it employs two sets of thread for completion – one creating loops while the other one to be inserted continuously within loops.

Given the ubiquity of embroidery, the question is – why did late Qing gentry ladies bother to embroider? To answer this question, this chapter will explore the relations between objects and people – how embroidery was understood by makers themselves and viewers, mostly male elites, as well as the relations between people who were connected by embroideries. This

⁴⁰ Collections.textilemuseum.ca/collection/10873. Accessed on September 14, 2022.

⁴¹ Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 77-115.

understanding may help to explain why the handiwork of embroidery could be a dangerous token. To analyze social relations constructed via objects and the cultural values attached to objects, I will borrow anthropologist Alfred Gell's ideas of "enchantment of technology" and "occult technician". As Gell explains, the technical process of art making amazes viewers, who will thus regard artists to be virtually supernatural and magical.⁴² This chapter will examine the technical excellence achieved by late Qing gentry embroiderers, which I argue reinforced their social identity with the qualities of intelligence, persistence, and obedience. I also contend that because gentry embroiderers were sacralised as occult technicians, they were erotically charged, contributing to the contrasting imagery of late Qing boudoir embroiderers as symbols of both virtue and sexuality.

Embroidering Gentry Women's Identity

During the late Qing various practitioners undertook embroidery for different purposes. On the one hand, as discussed in the introduction, gentry ladies held onto the elite tradition of embroidery, which was still sometimes devalued by Confucian scholars. On the other hand, the dynamic late Qing economy attracted poor men and women to make various embroideries to sell, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. It is arguable that embroidering constituted distinct cultural activities for the rich and the poor in many respects. Abundant Qing biographies, fiction, essays, and poems reveal why elite women embroidered, the environment that they were situated in, and the emotions and values that they attached to their handiworks. These accounts were essential for understanding the self-awareness of the gentry ladies and how they culturally distinguished themselves from poor embroiderers. With the analysis of these sources, I argue that

⁴² Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, edited by J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 40-67.

gentry women were defined as intelligent and virtuous via the technology of embroidery, and in other words, via the process of making embroidery. The artistic or monetary value represented by embroidered pieces was less important for the construction of gentry lady's identity.

First of all, embroidery was used to distinguish educated gentry ladies from unlearned women. In biographies, fiction and drama written by men, “*cixiu*” 刺繡 was found a generic label along with literacy and painting to claim gentry women's education, as this is valid for the Song, the Ming, and the Qing. In female poetry, embroidery was also a recurring motif shared by many that illustrated embroidery as their everyday experience.⁴³ Unlike literacy that was introduced to girls when they were four or five, embroidery was a challenging technology requiring a certain maturity. Typically, a girl would only begin to learn embroidery skills from an elder female. As the literature suggests, “she started to learn embroidery at eleven”, “she was twelve and knew embroidery”, and “she was thirteen, and she embroidered after weaving”.⁴⁴ Compared with other skills found among gentry women, namely literacy and painting, embroidery better constituted a type of female intelligence because it was almost an exclusive female knowledge field not shared with men.⁴⁵ Thus, the technology of embroidery served as the most appropriate means to develop women's mental and physical dexterity. “*Conghui*” 聰慧

⁴³ For a collection of female poems describing embroidering practice, see Shen Shanbao ed, *Mingyuan shihua*, in Chinese Text Project (ctext.org). For a discussion about embroidery as a knowledge field for women parallel to male literacy, see Grace S Fong, "Female Hands: Embroidery as a Knowledge Field in Women's Everyday Life in Late Imperial and Early Republican China," *Late Imperial China* 25, no. 1 (2004): 1-58.

⁴⁴ “十一學刺繡,” in Wang Tao 王燾, “Ti nanling lizhennü zhuan hou,” 題南陵李貞女傳後 in *Minguo Nanlingxian zhi* Vol. 42 (Lead print in Republican period), 2665, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. “十二刺繡紋,” in Liu Bing 劉炳, “Hezhong zhi shui ge ji Liu Ziyong Cheng Boyu” 河中之水歌寄劉子雍程伯羽, in Zeng Yu ed, *Jiangxi Shizheng*, in Chinese Text Project. “十三工女紅, 餘暇亦刺繡,” in Liao Yaopei 廖耀沛, “Zhennü xing,” 貞女行 in *Minguo Jintangxian Xuzhi* Vol. 10 (1921), 990, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁴⁵ In unusual cases, men's engagement in embroidery as an artistic pursuit attracted attention. For instance, Qing literatus Wan Nianshao gained renown for his comprehensive mastery of intellectual skills, encompassing both traditionally male and female domains. See Feng Jinbo, *Guochao huashi*, Vol. 1, 8-35, in Xuxiu sikuquanshu.

(intelligent) and “*congming*” 聰明 (clever) were typical words describing competent female embroiderers. The technology of embroidery as an indicator of female intelligence was so common that if a woman was “very brilliant”, she was naturally assumed be proficient at “embroidering with needles”.⁴⁶

Because embroidery was popular among gentry women, the activity shaped public understanding of what constituted the proper behavior of women. When many began to accept embroidery as an identity marker of intelligent women, embroidery gradually came to be associated with female virtue. The meaning of women’s virtue was not static in Chinese history; it varied over time, and many times was shaped by actions.⁴⁷ As put in the introduction, weaving was traditionally associated with frugality, persistence, and morality in imperial China, while embroidery, as a luxury, often denoted the opposite. For example, Confucian historians were known to blame Concubine Yang for the collapse of the Tang dynasty, in part because she employed more than seven-hundred fancy-fabric makers and embroiderers.⁴⁸ However, this began to change when Song and Ming dynasty elites adopted embroidery as a leisure activity. The adoption of embroidery by Song gentry women might have begun as a pastime as they were equipped with every element a good embroiderer required – sufficient time to devote to a time-consuming practice, secluded boudoir environment that ensured no distraction, smooth fingers

⁴⁶ The original text reads: “如此聰明比精于女工。” See Xu Shukui 徐述夔 (attributed to), *Biliange bianshu badongtian* Vol. 7 (Qing edition), 494, in the database Chinese Popular Literature.

⁴⁷ The official attitudes toward female virtue are mostly manifested via women’s biographies compiled by state and local scholars. In her article, Yi Ruolan argues that a wide range of female images from wise wives, intelligent mothers, to filial daughters in early women biographies was replaced by the narrowed emphasis on chaste widows in later period. See Yi Ruolan, “Nüxing ru shi: Zhengshi Lienü zhuan zhi bianzuan,” presented at *Zhongguo mingdai yanjiu xuehui disijie dierci huiyuan dahui*, Taipei, 2004. A series of judicial, economic, and cultural changes may have impacted on the shifting and competing claims on female virtue over time, which was also celebrated and significantly shaped by women themselves. For example, Lu Weijin discusses women’s ambivalent roles between filial daughter and chaste wife in late imperial China. See Lu Weijin, *True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁸ “宮中供貴妃院織錦刺繡之工，凡七百人。” See Liu Xu, *Jiu Tangshu* Vol. 7 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 2179.

that did not tangle threads, and intelligent minds for creating artworks. The interactions between literati and gentry embroiderers further promoted embroidering as an activity to be appreciated.⁴⁹ When literati started to admire the exquisite techniques of female embroiderers, it is likely that they also noticed various good qualities associated with embroidery. Women themselves must have also deployed important agency in rendering embroidery a morally appropriate everyday practice. Embroidery naturally shares some qualities with weaving signifying a diligent and deft-handed woman, and it supported the family's finances when necessary. Moreover, as a time-consuming activity, embroidery prevented idleness as it required a diligent input into the labor comparable to weaving.

It is difficult to outline a timeline for the changing attitude toward embroidery. The concurrence of embroidery and *nügong* as a collocate appeared no later than the late Song dynasty when society stopped considering embroidery as contrary to *nügong*.⁵⁰ However, as a widely acceptable activity, embroidery was only fully legitimized by the Qing government. As Francesca Bray has shown, the Qing government exhibited great anxiety regarding the breakdown of the traditional “*nangeng nüzhì*” (men tilling and women weaving 男耕女織) social norm as male engagement in weaving replaced women because of specialization in the late Ming and the Qing dynasties.⁵¹ The Manchus thus promoted sericulture practice universally.⁵²

Although this action did not ‘correct’ the gender balance in weaving, embroidery as an

⁴⁹ See a number of male elites' words acclaiming the famous late Ming Gu Family embroidery, discussed by Huang I-Fen in “Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 36 (2012): 92-99.

⁵⁰ The earliest concurrence of *nügong* and embroidering that I notice of appears in a biography of Wangshi that “(she) learned *nügong* and embroidery when she was twelve 十二學女紅刺繡”, written by Fan Peng, who lived in the late Song and early Yuan period. It is likely that an earlier concurrence of the two terms exists elsewhere. See Fan Peng, “Jiefu Wang Shi,” in *Sibu congkan chubian: jibu guochaowen lei* Vol. 3, 29, in the Unihan Databases.

⁵¹ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 206-236.

⁵² E-Tu Zen Sun, “Sericulture and Silk Textile Production in Ch'ing China,” In *Economic Organization in Chinese Society*, ed. by W.E. Willmott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1972), 81.

alternative fabric-based technology may have eased the state's concern by reasserting women's responsibility in the family and promoting their contribution to a gender-balanced society. The Qing literature constantly associates embroidery with *nüigong*, which reflects the public understanding of embroidery as an acceptable female everyday activity. In Qing local gazetteers, a significant number of women with embroidery skill became the protagonist in the biographies.

In Qing local gazetteers, embroidery is the perfect activity that demonstrates women's self-cultivation as quiet partners to their husbands. An exemplary early explanation of quietness as female virtue can be found in Ban Zhao's 班昭 Han dynasty *Nüjie* 女誡⁵³: "Be quiet and gentle, modest and correct, behave appropriately to avoid immorality, and act conforming to the standard: this is what called women's virtue."⁵⁴ Ban Zhao's definition of female virtue stands as one of the mainstream explanations of female morality. And quietness as the basic component of female virtue was accepted regardless of different dynasties and regions because less talk indicated a gentle and obedient woman. Although in reality, women would sometimes gather in groups to embroider and chat, only the ones who embroidered quietly away from crowds were encouraged and acclaimed by Confucians. Female embroiderers depicted in local gazetteers never mingled with crowds; they either embroidered alone or next to their husbands. Qing gazetteers identify a substantial number of embroiderers as wives to civil examination candidates – they were wives to provincial graduates 舉人妻, wives to tribute students 貢生妻, wives to

⁵³ *Nüjie* is commonly known as the earliest surviving didactic surviving text that aimed at a female audience. Olivia Milburn argues that another writing from Banzhao, *Jiaonü* 教女 constitutes an earlier such text with its discovery from a recent archaeological excavation. The two texts include same writing that describes 婦德. See Olivia Milburn, "Instructions to Women: Admonitions Texts for a Female Readership in Early China," *NAN NÜ* 20, 2 (2019): 169-171;178.

⁵⁴ This translation is adapted from Olivia Milburn's version. The originally text writes "Be quiet and gentle, modest and correct, behave appropriately and act according to the law: this is what called women's virtue," which was translated from the Chinese text "清閒貞靜，守節整齊，行己有恥，動靜有法，是謂婦德." See Olivia Milburn, "Instructions to Women: Admonitions Texts for a Female Readership in Early China," 178.

state students 國學生妻, and wives to licentiates 生員妻.⁵⁵ When the husband was studying or working, his embroiderer-wife was at his side (*zuodu* 佐讀 or *bandu* 伴讀) – this combination comprised an idealized image of merit as the couple encouraged each other to be quiet, diligent, and persistent.⁵⁶

In Qing gazetteers, most “virtuous women” were described as chaste widows and faithful maidens, and skill in embroidering was often highlighted as a personal attribute. In a biography from one early Qing gazetteer, provincial graduate Liu Fan’s 劉蕃 wife Ruan Shi 阮氏 (Lady Ruan) was portrayed as a loyal and righteous woman who committed suicide during the late Ming warfare when attackers broke the gate of her dwelling city. The depiction about righteous women was not rare in the writings of Chinese official histories and gazetteers.⁵⁷ Female martyrs were recorded in Chinese history from time to time, but they were particularly respected and praised by Ming and Qing officialdom as a promotion of moral correctness.⁵⁸ Yet it was not until the Qing that women’s embroidery skills appeared in the narratives. Within forty-four characters of Ruan Shi’s short biography, fifteen characters were used to describe her personal traits. As her biography depicts: “(she was) chaste and intelligent, and (she was) an expert in embroidering and *xiaokai*.”⁵⁹ This detail reveals that the Qing gazetteer writers complied with the contemporary

⁵⁵ Translation of the titles taken from Benjamin A Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 102.

⁵⁶ For a few examples, Yang Shi 楊氏 “embroidery to assist reading 刺繡佐讀,” in Chen Yong, “Yang Liefu bei,” in *Daoguang Xuxiu Huiningxian zhi* Vol. 2 (1839), 81, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Zuo Liu Shi 左劉氏 embroidered to accompany her husband who read, in Jiang Lishan, “Zuo Liu Shi zhuan,” in *Minguo Maguanxian zhi* Vol. *yiwen* (1933), 777, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. For maiden embroiderers were described to be quiet in contrast to father and brother who were talking, see Liu Qipei, “Fu Lienü zhuan,” in *Tongzhi Xuxiu Cilixian zhi* Vol. *yiwen* (1869), 1337, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁵⁷ Yi Ruolan traces the highlighting of righteous women in official histories to *Weishu* 魏書 compiled in the sixth century. She argues a tendency in the following dynasties to further featuring women with moral integrity. See Yi Ruolan, “Nüxing ru shi: zhengshi Lienü zhuan zhi bianzuan.”

⁵⁸ For an in-depth monograph on this topic, see Lu, *True to Her Word*.

⁵⁹ The original text reads: “性貞慧工刺繡小楷,” in *Kangxi Tongchengxian zhi* Vol. 6 (1682), 708, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. *Xiaokai* is a type of calligraphical font known for neatness.

norm understanding embroidery as good cultivation, whether intentionally or subconsciously. Embroidery was accepted as a type of morally correct education that fostered righteous and royal women.

When martyrdom was not practiced, loyalty to the patrilineal family of surviving women was highly advocated, in which embroidery also played a role. A typical story about chaste widows is recorded in the late Qing *Jianglingxian zhi* 江陵縣志, which highlights a local lady Yu Jinxiang 喻金相, who was intelligent and literate, and was good at embroidery and poetry. Yu married when she was twenty-one, and her husband fell ill three years later. At that point, Yu chose to slice flesh from her leg to cure her husband.⁶⁰ Although her husband felt better at first, his health condition eventually deteriorated, and he succumbed. Yu was thus in anguish and attempted suicide before her family rescued her from death. Yu was a lady who was extremely loyal to her patrilineal family and was willing to commit full sacrifice to her husband. In her biography, the words describing embroidery as her youth education may have indicated the origin of her quality.⁶¹ Another late Qing gazetteer, *Fanyuxian xuzhi* 番禺縣續志 documents the story of Ling Jin 凌金, who was an older sister of a local provincial graduate. Ling Jin received good education from early on as she mastered embroidery, calligraphy, and poetry. She insisted on marrying her sick fiancé, who died soon after the wedding. Ling Jin therefore was widowed for thirty-seven years before she died, during which period she took care of her grand-parents-in-law with great respect and full ritual.⁶² Similar to Yu's story, Ling dedicated her whole life to her

⁶⁰ Flesh-slicing or *gegu* 割股 was a virtuous repertoire which exists in various types of pre-modern Chinese literature. The performance anchored Buddhist belief and Confucian tradition, and it was mostly a representation of filial piety. For a discussion about flesh-slicing in late imperial China, see Jimmy Yu, *Sanctity and Self-inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 73-84.

⁶¹ Yu “knows reading and embroidering,” depicted in *GuangXu Jianglingxian zhi* Vol. 41 (Baoping guan: 1877), 2161, in The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁶² See *Xuantong Panyuxian Xuzhi* Vol. 25 (1921), 1301, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

husband's family despite the husband's death at an early age. She clearly was a master of etiquette and manners who conducted proper behavior her whole life, a quality likely creditable to the persistence in her everyday embroidery activity.

The above discussion demonstrates how Qing biographies frequently used embroidery to construct gentry lady's identity – as educated, deft-handed, docile, and disciplined women. Certainly, some of these qualities, especially persistence and self-isolation, were shared by their contemporary poor embroiderers. But when poor women embroidered, economic incentive was always the major driving force – one had to support family and thus worked persistently.⁶³ Likewise, when gentry families lost their social privilege and began to rely on female textile productions to overcome financial difficulty, embroidery was a practical solution.⁶⁴ For gentry ladies without economic concerns, it was the activity of embroidery itself that offered glamor that differentiated them from their less affluent peers.

What did They Embroider?

The discussion above reveals some female qualities associated with embroidery. Yet in the textual sources, women's voice is limited. At this point, one may prefer to turn to objects as they sometimes speak more about their makers. However, what kind of embroideries were created by Qing gentry women is a question not to be answered easily. The surviving primary

⁶³ There are bountiful Qing biographies describing poor women who embroidered to support the family. Most of them were widows who lacked male economic and labor support. For one example, see Chengshi 程氏 whose “family was poor, (and thus) embroidered to obtain clothes and foods 家貧，刺繡以供衣食。” In *Kangxi Huizhoufu zhi* Vol. 16 (1698), 2191-92, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁶⁴ Jining gazetteer in Daoguang's reign traced the start of the prosperous local Sun family to Kangxi period, when widow Liu Shi supported the whole family after the death of her husband Sun Fangji, a provincial graduate. The education of the young was thanks to Liu Shi's needlework skills as a livelihood. See *Daoguang Jiningzhilizhou zhi* Vol. 5 (1858), 2473, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Feng Erkang notices embroidering as a livelihood for Huizhou ladies in the Qing dynasty. While some supported the patrilineal family of the late husband, unmarried women raised their natal family. See Feng Erkang, “Qingdai Huizhou xianyuan de zhijia he shengcunshu,” *Tianjin shifan daxue xuebao* No.4, 2015: 23-29.

sources seldom document the actual objects that the ladies embroidered. Although their embroidering practice is constantly described in various writings, as this chapter has discussed above, these texts almost never give attention to the pieces that were produced via this technology. Likewise, the extant artefacts do not offer a clear answer to this question either. While bountiful Qing embroideries are kept by modern museums, research institutes, and private collectors, embroideries made by gentry women are found alongside commercial embroideries produced in workshops. One specific item may help to discover one individual story, such as the pouch analyzed at the beginning of this chapter, but the whole picture is not easy to piece together. The surviving Qing female costumes might offer certain insight as they suggest that embroidery ubiquitously adorned clothes of ladies from wealthy families. However, given the fact that commercialized fabric stores and tailor shops were quite available in the Qing dynasty, gentry ladies were very likely to purchase their clothes from the professionals.⁶⁵ In other cases, they would hire poor women to sew and embroider, and they only occasionally participated in the making of clothes for themselves and their family members. Then if clothes were made by others, what was left for gentry women to embroider?

I suggest that most girls embroidered dowry goods. Many modern historians have used doweries to demonstrate women's financial independence and property ownership.⁶⁶ Although limited attention is given to the content of dowry goods, it is acknowledged that embroidery

⁶⁵ Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 77-115.

⁶⁶ The rich literature is impossible to be listed inclusively here. For a few examples, see Susan Mann, "Dowry Wealth and Wifely Virtue in Mid-Qing Gentry Households," *Late Imperial China*, 2008, 29 (1S): 64-76; Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "Shifts in Marriage Finance from the Sixth to the Thirteenth Century," in *Women and the Family in Chinese History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 62-88 and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 99-113; Mao Liping, *Qingdai jiazhuang yanjiu*, Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2007.

usually made up a significant portion in Qing dowry goods.⁶⁷ The making of dowry goods seemed to be inevitable for most young girls who were preparing for marriage, but the content of dowry varied significantly between the rich and the poor. According to surviving Qing dowry lists, affluent families were very likely to have professionals help with the embroidered fabrics due to the generous amount of goods that they prepared for the bride, but embroidery would still be an essential skill demonstrating the ability of gentry girls to be a fully-fledged wife-to-be. As surviving dowry lists, gazetteers, and missionary accounts only yield limited information about Qing dowry goods, and the makers of specific dowry goods barely register in modern scholars' knowledge, it is difficult to discern what exactly was made by the girl herself. Nonetheless, primary sources indicate that in many places the bride personally participated in the preparation for her dowry, and especially in the Lower Yangtze region where sericulture was traditionally practiced.⁶⁸ Various gazetteers document that embroidered pieces were both important dowry items and appropriate gifts from the bride to her new family members. The content of a dowry varied between individuals, but much of it consisted of clothes for the bride to use after marriage. Other embroidered pieces may include her wedding gown, accessories such as socks, shoes, and insoles, beddings, and embroideries that embellished the furniture.⁶⁹ In some cases, after the engagement, the fiancé would send silk fabrics to his fiancée to be embroidered.⁷⁰ When the embroideries were finished, some of them would be displayed in the new couple's room, which

⁶⁷ See, for example, Bray's discussion about embroidered goods as dowry in Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 265. In Ebrey's research, she notices the escalation of dowry and significant portion of embroidery for wedding in the Song dynasty, see Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters*, 99-103.

⁶⁸ There are ample examples indicating that brides personally made dowry embroideries in the Lower Yangtze region. But this phenomenon is also seen frequently in southwestern parts of China such as Hunan and Yunnan minority communities in the middle- and late- Qing. For one example, see the biography of Jiang Yinxiu 蔣迎秀 in *Jiaqing Guangnanfu zhi* Vol. 3 (1825), 313, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁶⁹ For a case study of Qing dowry, see Chen Yutang, "Yifen Qingdai jiazhuang shilu," *Shanghai dang'an* 2002, (05): 26.

⁷⁰ *Minguo Ronghexian zhi* Vol. 8 (1936), 307-09, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

was a joyous occasion to showcase the bride's admirable skill.⁷¹ It is also important to gift accessories such as pillow cases and shoes to the bride's new family members, who would appreciate the new wife's skilfulness from her embroideries. Therefore, embroidery was considered "proper business" for young girls, who often started to prepare for their dowry years before the wedding.⁷² The underlining message in these customs emphasizes embroidery as a commonly expected skill for women, which functioned as a proof of intelligence, and the ability of earning income when necessary.

Individual biographies of gentry women in gazetteers and elsewhere also exhibit little information about the exact projects on which gentry women worked. The authors of these biographies were male, and their preference is never stated with regard to any practical embroideries such as gowns and furniture. Instead, they mostly depict gentry embroidery as an artistic pursuit, and an expression of cultural superiority acknowledged by both the elite writers and gentry women themselves. It is also noticeable that the actual objects are rarely mentioned. Only occasionally the titles of some artworks are noted, for instance, *shennü tu* 神女圖 and *loushen tu* 洛神圖 by the famous Qing embroiderer Yu Yunzhu 余攄珠.⁷³ In most cases, the

⁷¹ In Liaoning Hailong county, the marriage custom was described "(the customers) either praised the fine embroidery or the excellent skills (of the bride) 不夸刺繡好即稱活計高," in *Minguo Hailongxian zhi* Vol. 14 (1937), 1576, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁷² *Lianshi* describes that "embroidery and *nügong* is the principal business of women. Pillow tops and formal shoes are both courtesy gifts to others after marriage 刺繡女紅婦人正事也。枕頂禮鞋皆嫁後拜人之禮." See Wang Chutong, *Lianshi* Vol 41, 627, in Xuxiu Siku quanshu. Guangdong Chaozhou gazetteer documents that "all girls at their eleven or twelve were prepared for wedding gowns in advance by their mothers. Therefore, even rich families do not neglect skills of weaving, sewing, and embroidery 凡女子十一二齡其母即為豫治嫁衣。故織紉、刺繡之功，雖富家不廢也." See *Qianlong Chaozhoufu zhi* Vol. 12 (1893), 504, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Dorothy Ko also notices gifting shoes to the husband's family members as a tradition for brides in the seventeenth-century Hangzhou. See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), 170.

⁷³ Yu Yunzhu was a reputable Yangzhou embroiderer living in Kangxi's reign. The Qing literati Wang Shizhen 王士禎 describes her marvelous embroidering skill in a number of his essay collections, including *Yisheng ji* 倚聲集, *Yuyang shanren ji* 漁陽山人集, and *Chibei outan* 池北偶談. The image of *shennü* and *luoshen*, the goddesses originated from Qu Yuan's 屈原 romantic poetry in the Warring State period.

author of the biography writes of being stunned by the exquisite embroidering techniques that resembled painting skills.

Embroideries resembling paintings began to appear in the Song dynasty when gentry embroiderers extensively employed satin stitches and extra-fine silk threads to create smoother, pictorial visual effects. These works were given the name *xiuhua* 繡畫 (embroidered painting), which received appreciation from Song literati.⁷⁴ During the Qing, various innovative stitches were created, such as *qi zhen* 齊針, *kelin zhen* 刻麟針, and *xuan zhen* 旋針 that further supported painting-mimicking techniques.⁷⁵ The appreciation for technical marvellousness is evident in male observation of embroideries in the writing of Qing female biographies. Embroidering and painting were types of cultivation constantly held in parallel.⁷⁶ More importantly, the most fabulous embroideries were always the imitation of paintings – “it looks like a painting”, “it is no different from a painting.”⁷⁷ Moreover, the fineness of the thread remained a mystery to male literati as they sometimes commented that “the trace of the threads is invisible.”⁷⁸ For male elites, the technology of embroidery was supreme because it magically

⁷⁴ The term *xiuhua* was later replaced by *huaxiu* 畫繡 (pictorial embroidery) in describing painting-like embroideries. For a brief introduction about the history of *xiuhua*, see Huang I-Fen, “Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai,” 80–84 and Xu Jia, “Xiuhua: Zhongguo Jiangnan chuantong cixiu yanjiu,” (PhD diss., China Academy of Art, 2016), 13–16.

⁷⁵ *Qi zhen*, or “parallel satin stitch” uses rows of satin stitches to depict objects with smooth surfaces. *Kelin zhen* (“carved scale stitch”) decorated small elements of insect wings, fish scales, and dragon scales. *Xuan zhen*, or circling stitches create a sense of rotating movements. For explanation of these stitches and description of other Qing stitches, see Dieter Kuhn and Zhao Feng, ed, *Chinese Silks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 477–79.

⁷⁶ The emphasis on female talent in poetry, painting, or embroidering was seen in biographies of women from great families. For example, Chen Shi 陳氏, wife to the provincial graduate was described as “good at embroidery and painting 工刺繡善繪.” See *Guangxu De’anfu zhi* Vol.17 (1888), 2356, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁷⁷ For example, “望之如繪畫,” see *Daoguang Nanhaixian zhi* Vol. 41 (1868), 2806, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Fujian Minhou gazetteer describes lady Xue Shaohui 薛紹徽 that she turned painting into embroidery. See *Minguo Minhouxian zhi* Vol.101 (1933), 1603, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁷⁸ For example, see “能滅去針線痕跡,” in *Guangxu Pujiangxian zhi* Vol. 14 (1916 lead print edition), 2094, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

transferred painting to handiwork and this technology is so incredible that it leaves no trace identifiable by the naked eye. Although it is presumable that gentry embroidery shared similar aesthetics with literati painting, the components of the embroidery artworks were not a concern for male commentators. There were never words in those biographies describing the composition or the style of the embroidered images. In Gell's terms, it was the "technical excellence" of the embroiderers that amazed others rather than the aesthetic value presented by those embroidered objects.⁷⁹

It is questionable whether biography writers can speak for female embroiderers, but in some cases, women did have certain influence over what was included in their biographies. The compiling of gazetteer biographies in the Qing dynasty often began with collecting individual stories and anecdotes from local residents. During this process, specialists were sent to the community to conduct interviews.⁸⁰ If the protagonists were still alive or had left important personal information with their family members, their words would certainly be appreciated. Thus, in some biographies direct quotations from the protagonist can be seen, such as Lu Fengchi's 陸鳳池 story in Guangxu *Qingpuxian zhi* 青浦縣志, and this explains how gentry women understood embroidery and their embroidered pieces. Lu Fengchi was born into a distinguished Jiangnan family during Kangxi's reign (1661-1722). Like other Jiangnan gentry women of the time, she was talented in both literacy and embroidery. She became seriously sick when she was thirty-two, and she left her last words to her husband on her deathbed: "There is a *bogu tu* 博古圖 jacket stored in the chest – every stitch and every thread was the fruit of my painstaking work, so please keep it well. Someday (you can) show it to my two daughters, and

⁷⁹ Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," 51.

⁸⁰ Feng Erkang, *Qingdai renwu zhuanji shiliao yanjiu* (Tianjin: Tianjin jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005), 328-332.

(seeing this jacket) is like seeing me.”⁸¹ In this story, Lu fully acknowledged her identity as an embroiderer who equated herself to her embroidered work. Her legacy was a jacket, something comparable to poetry or essay collection of a male that would confirm one’s existence. This biography may verify the participation of elite women in clothes making, yet it was a garment carefully preserved as an artwork. The embroiderer also intended to resemble paintings, and the fact that the artwork was conducted on a jacket increased the difficulty of composition and thus demanded advanced techniques. Lu took embroidery as a great personal accomplishment, in which project every movement of her fingers performed with extreme caution. Lu’s story portrays her as a pious devotee to embroidery. The embroidery that Lu esteemed was not meant to be functional or displayed; it was stored away as an embodiment of her intelligence and persistence.

The discussion above demonstrates that both Qing male and female elites regarded the practice of embroidery as more significant than the actual objects of embroideries, and that they paid more attention to artistic works than practical garments. Good qualities such as intelligence, quietness, and persistence were exhibited through performance, while economic value was their least concern. Lu’s biography was rather a rare case that mentioned her actual work. In most cases, they simply conclude their embroidering activity with one word “xiu” 繡 (to embroider) in their poetry.⁸² Thus the discussion above only yields a limited picture of what gentry women embroidered. Both male elites and gentry women’s perspectives gave little attention to objects. From the technical perspective, small pieces such as purses, shoes, and handkerchiefs were

⁸¹ The original text reads: “箱中存博古圖衫，一針一線我心血在焉，善藏之。他日以示二女，如見我也。” In *Guangxu Qingpuxian zhi* Vol. 23 (1878), 1495, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. *Bogu tu* is a painting motif depicting antiques.

⁸² For discussion on the description of embroidery practice in female poetry, see Grace S Fong, "Female Hands: Embroidery as a Knowledge Field in Women's Everyday Life in Late Imperial and Early Republican China," 1-58.

convenient enough to be taken along and easier to make than large garments, although gentry women almost never comment on these pieces. This absence denotes that the practice of embroidery was more important than objects in constructing gentry women's virtue and intelligence in male and female discourses. Meanwhile, the object of embroidery tended to have negative connotations. In contrast to embroidering practice that embodied certain good female qualities, the objects of embroidery only bred luxury and wantonness, and the woman who did not produce but only consumed embroidery was harshly criticized.⁸³

Embroiderers as Occult Technicians

In the fourth year of Emperor Qianlong's reign (1740), official Bao Zuoyong 包祚永 submitted a memorial to the emperor, in which he discussed the uselessness of embroidery, a popular hobby among banner women:

Now the custom of every banner is that women only take embroidery as their business. When they finish a purse, they would gift it to their kin as reciprocation during festivals. It is popular (to make purses) with skilfulness. Since a purse cannot be crafted without months of work, it is really not beneficial (to make them). If this effort can be put into weaving, the fineness and delicacy of the product will be comparable to fabrics made in the south.⁸⁴

⁸³ The Hunan example mentioned earlier well-demonstrated that when embroidery encouraged women to follow fashion and chase luxury, it is mostly condemned. On the other hand, if the wealth produces their own embroideries, they may be acknowledged. As Shanxi Xiaoyi gazetteer documents that: "Even wealthy families also rarely hire embroiderer, (clothes) were mostly women's homemade 即富家亦鮮用針工，多閨中自成之。" In *GuangXu Xiaoyiting zhi* Vol. 3 (1883), 123, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁸⁴ The original text reads: "今各旗風俗，其婦女唯以工於刺繡為務。每製為小荷包，於親戚中歲時酬答用為餽遺，以工巧相尚。••一荷包之功非積日累月不能，甚屬無益。若移此力以勤紡織，其精緻細蜜豈在南布之下。" In *Guiyangfu zhi* Vol. 76 (engraved in Xianfeng's reign), 4116, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

In this memorial, Bao Zuoyong proposed a solution to the financial crisis caused by the banners, who as a privileged class had become a heavy burden for the Qing government.⁸⁵ Bao's suggestion attempted to transform banner women's textile skill from superfluous to practical so as to follow Emperor Kangxi's admonition to restore a "men tilling and women weaving" society, which Bao discussed in an earlier part of this memorial. Bao regarded embroidery as detrimental not just because it generated no economic value, but also because of the tremendous time and energy wasted for the project. This is a view similar to the typical attitude toward embroidery before the rise of the gentry class in the Song dynasty. And for the Manchus, when the financial source of the elites became a problem, embroidery was exposed as an easy target. Purses were specifically targeted in this text – it was a popular reciprocal gift which did not directly yield economic value. Yet there was also a moral concern in the frequent interactions between embroiderers and recipients, as described in a comment from a Kangxi gazetteer:

Purses are with the size of eight or nine *cun* ... (the customer) must ask the most skilful maker to embroider on it without considering the high price. Frivolous young men thus take this as an excuse to visit (female) inner rooms. When walking on the frosty ground, we should know that the icy days are coming soon; embroidery does not only harm *nügong*!⁸⁶

The sexual appeal of embroiderers is quite evident in this source. Other than this example, the description about female embroiderers as the target of affairs can be found in both official documents and literature. Just as Susan Mann notices, embroidery often had the

⁸⁵ For a discussion of the fiscal crisis from supporting the bannermen and a series reforms attempting to solve this problem, see Mark Christopher Elliott, "Resident Aliens: The Manchu Experience in China, 1644-1760" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1993), 400-491.

⁸⁶ The original text goes: "荷包方廣可八九寸...不惜高價必求女紅之最者而刺繡焉。輕薄少年乃有借此往來中葦者。履霜堅冰，刺繡之害不止女紅矣。" In *Kangxi Zhuluoxian zhi* Vol. 8 (1716), 458, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

connotation of sexuality. The word “*aixiu*” (愛繡 to love embroidery) was a homophone for “*aixiu*” (愛羞 to love shame), a term frequently found in Qing erotic prose and poetry depicting a woman engaging in sexual intercourse.⁸⁷ It may not be difficult to understand that female embroiderers were sexually alluring. A highly accomplished embroiderer was usually in her youth. Her vision and agility were at their peak, she would have a pair of smooth hands that would not tangle the threads and floss, a rinsed mouth clean enough to moisten the thread ends, and she would sit in a perfectly straight posture to adjust to the embroidery frame, all of which composed a sensual image of fine bodily movements. If we borrow Alfred Gell’s theory to interpret the allure of a female embroiderer, her “technical excellence” perhaps reinforced the asymmetrical relationship between herself and her admirers because she was able to create technical miracles beyond the understanding of viewers.⁸⁸ In other words, an excellent embroiderer turned herself into an “occult technician”, who dazzled viewers with her magical ability of creating astonishing craftwork.⁸⁹ The viewers would, in turn, imagine embroiderers in a fantasized way. In the following paragraphs, I will explore how embroidery rendered female “occult technicians” in various fictional and historical writings.

To begin, I would like to return to the topic of pouches in the Qing dynasty. A pouch is a small accessory; it is a convenient medium to convey sensual information – it is worn close to the body and small enough to be appreciated privately. Pouches may not always be homemade, as a painting depicting a late Qing Guangdong peddler shows that all types of purses were quite available for purchasing (figure 1.4). As the beginning of this chapter suggests, Qing purses came in different sizes and had various functions, but small pouches for fragrance were the most

⁸⁷ Mann, *Precious Records*, 159-160.

⁸⁸ Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” 51.

⁸⁹ In his article, Gell dedicates one section into the discussion entitled “The Artist as Occult Technician.” For his discussion, see Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” 49-53.

popular. Republican literati Zhao Ruzhen 趙汝珍 recalls the prevalence of fragrant pouches at temple festivals and fairs. As he describes: “Beijing had pouches sold all over the city, and especially on temple festivals and fairs... (pouches were) covered with embroideries, made with extreme skillfulness. Wealthy customers particularly vie with each other for glamour with various kinds (of pouches) incomparably exquisite.”⁹⁰ These pouches were unquestionably handmade, by rather poor women in their spare time than girls from well-to-do families. The techniques for these pouches were also undeniably exquisite and extremely skillful, but the patterns and motifs were in accordance with ordinary taste.



Figure 1.4 A late Qing painting (attributed to Tingqua) that depicts a purse peddler. Various purses were sold along with fabrics, yarn, scissors, and other accessories. Source: Wang Yarong, *Zhongguo minjian cixiu* (Taipei: Diqiu chubanshe, 1986), 18.

⁹⁰ The original text reads: “北京售賣香囊之肆遍於九城，廟會集市售賣者尤多...繡花鑲嵌，極人力之可能，富貴者尤爭奇斗巧，各式各樣精妙絕倫。” In Zhao Ruzhen, *Guwan zhinan* (Qingdao: Qingdao chubanshe, 2014), 393.

When gentry ladies made pouches themselves, patterns and stitches of the embroidery became important identifiers signifying the taste and skills of the embroiderer. If we are convinced that gentry embroiderers were artists, when comparing them with painters, they would have specific motifs and stitches that they were fond of, just as painters are identifiable through their motifs and brushwork. For example, the personal style of the pouch analyzed at the beginning of this chapter is quite strong – the whole piece is finished with *lasuo* stitches and infused with a soft and gentle touch, let alone the seals as obvious identity markers, which distinguishes it from commercially made purses. The fact that personal identity is conveyed via pouches can also be validated by a story included in the late Ming fiction collection *Jingshi tongyan* 警世通言. In the story, a local gentleman Wan’s daughter Xiuniang 繡娘 was abducted. Shen then managed to send a pouch to her parents, who were able to identify their daughter’s belongings via her “*shouji*” 手跡 (embroidering techniques).⁹¹ In this story, it is the personalized techniques that identify the makers. More commonly, patterns were created to express makers’ expectations, and auspicious images were among the most popular.⁹² Mandarin ducks, for instance, are mostly associated with marriage, and thus are embroidered as a token of love. In the description of the Qing novel *Renzhonghua* 人中畫, young lady Miss Zhuang 莊 embroidered a couple of mandarin ducks along with her signature, which was mistakenly acquired by a young man Yuan Yan 元晏. But handmade embroidery was such strong evidence for romantic relationships that no one would doubt the intimacy between Zhuang and Yuan so long as Yuan carried the embroidered piece.⁹³

⁹¹ Feng Menglong, Yang tong annotated, *Jingshi tongyan* (Wuhan: Chongwen shuju, 2015), 338.

⁹² There is a wide scope of literature devoted to the study of Chinese auspicious images, but the earliest research of this subject is Nozaki Nobuchika’s *Kisshō zuan kaidai Shina fūzoku no ichi kenkyū* in 1928, recently has been translated into Chinese and published as 中國吉祥圖 (Beijing: Beijing yanshan chubanshe, 2009)

⁹³ *Renzhonghua* (Shangzhitang, Qianlong period), 33-38, in the database Chinese Popular Literature.

In popular literature, sometimes the tight connection between embroidered objects and their makers is exaggerated, not just because the item reflects the identity of the maker, but more importantly, because embroideries were directly touched by the female body. This charges embroideries with much erotic meaning, which allows the male protagonist, and perhaps also male readers, to fantasize about the female body. Embroidered shoes, for example, were the most typical objects connecting to the secret part of female body. The Qing drama *Hongqingyan* 紅情言 epitomizes the fantasy toward the female body via objects by setting an exceptionally tiny object – the end of the thread – as the key item developing the narrative.⁹⁴ In the story, gentry maiden Miss Lu 盧 embroidered against the window on a boat. After nipping the thread with her teeth, she spit the thread end outside the window, which happened to drop down in front of the young student Huangfu 皇甫 who was on another boat nearby. Huangfu thus started his fantasy over the bit of thread as he said: “the red thread moistened by saliva, the beautiful, curved silk thread – the lush moistness is a peep at the good manners (of the maker). The lush moistness is a peep at the good manners, and thus the origin of this fragrance should not be far.”⁹⁵ Realizing that the thread was from the girl on the boat next to him, Huangfu failed to sleep for the whole night, and he sighed: “I developed a sense of new anxiety for the maiden on the boat nearby. (I wonder) if she sympathized with me and thus spit the red thread purposely, or she was only embroidering and left her saliva accidentally?”⁹⁶ Huangfu’s line well explains male fantasy over the object touched by a female, and from there, he started to yearn for a romantic relationship.

⁹⁴ This drama is attributed to early Qing scholar Wang Hong 王翊. See Wang Hong, *Hongqingyan* (Early Qing edition), 31-41, in Chinese Popular Literature. Several drama plays with similar narrative existed during late imperial China, for example, see *Tu rong ji* (Handwritten edition), 19, in the database Chinese Popular Literature.

⁹⁵ The original text reads: “紅涎飛線，綃卷呈妍，覩盈盈一點穠沾。覩盈盈一點穠沾，料應是香臺非遠。” In Wang Hong, *Hongqingyan* (Early Qing edition), 32, in the database Chinese Popular Literature.

⁹⁶ The original text reads: “小生為鄰船少女惹起新愁。不知有意憐才，故飛紅唾？無情刺繡，偶落餘涎？” See Wang Hong, *Hongqingyan* (Early Qing edition), 39, in the database Chinese Popular Literature.

The narrative selects a tiny but unusual object to describe, but the desire is rather explicit as items infused with body fluid are difficult to obtain in reality.

The literary depiction of male fantasy toward female embroiderers has deep roots in real life. When an embroiderer picked up a needle to work, she would need to sit next to the window where the light was bright enough. With the gentle movements of her delicate hands and soft fingers, the image of a female embroiderer created an alluring picture framed in window sashes. The danger of this picture was that once it was seen by a lascivious man, the girl could become a potential victim. In a real case recorded in a Guangxu gazetteer, local hoodlum Chen Dawen 陳大文 coveted a married woman Zhang Shi 張氏 for long but had no chance to approach her. One day Zhang Shi embroidered by the window, and this offered an opportunity for Chen. Chen then came to the outside of Zhang Shi's house and attempted to flirt with her. Embarrassed and offended, Zhang Shi soon shut the window and hid away. At the end of this story, Chen ended up with a lawsuit due to his inappropriate behavior.⁹⁷ Embroidery became a risky activity that could expose a girl or woman to outside glances.⁹⁸ Similarly, the beautiful embroiderer by the window is a stereotype in Qing fiction describing the first sight of the female protagonist by the male character. In fiction, there are usually explicit details describing the beautiful body and the elegant movements of the embroiderer.⁹⁹ Embroidered objects discussed previously are able to reveal some aspect of the personality of the maker, but her embroidering practice may expose the embroiderer directly to intruding glances directly.

⁹⁷ *Kun Xin liangxian Xuxiu hezhi* Vol. 37 (1880), 2583-84. in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁹⁸ Francesca Bray's study shows that two-story houses with the female boudoir upstairs was common in the south of China rather than the north. See Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 73. While the upper-class women would be secluded by enclosed walls, it is most likely that merchants and lower-level officials dwelled in two-story houses.

⁹⁹ For one example, see the depiction of Yin Xiulan 陰秀蘭 in Yu Wanchun, *Dangkou zhi* (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2013), 294.

Frequent female interactions constituted another danger that jeopardizes women sexually. The technology of embroidering in the Qing period was usually adopted from females to females, sometimes mothers taught daughters, sometimes elder kin taught their younger relatives, and it was not uncommon to learn from a hired tutor with a good reputation in the community. While Confucian elites seemed not to worry about ladies embroidering at home alone, they were uneasy about large gatherings and frequent interactions among women as this encouraged potential troubles and gave lubricious ones opportunities to exploit. In Qianlong's reign (1736-95), a local elite reported a case from the modern Hebei province. It describes that a seventeen-old girl went to her relative to help with the embroidery and had a sleepover, which afforded a hired laborer the opportunity to violate her at night.¹⁰⁰ This tragedy reveals the danger of women traveling outside, yet the problems caused by embroidery were likely to happen inside the house as well because sometimes strange women were solicited. Late Ming scholar Yang Xunji's 楊循吉 collection *Pengxuan bieji* 蓬軒別記 documented a story that was later included by a variety of Qing sources including scholar's collections and gazetteers.¹⁰¹ The story highlights a man who was raised as a girl and thus had small feet and excellent embroidering skill. He then cross-dressed himself and made a living by teaching daughters of wealthy families. While staying in the employer's house, he remained shy and never talked to anyone. At night, he shared the same bedroom with the student. He disguised himself well until one day a man attempted to offend him sexually and discovered this secret. The veracity of this story is unknown. But given the fact that *Pengxuan bieji* aims at documenting sensational cases of the

¹⁰⁰ *Qianlong Suningxian zhi* Vol. 9 (1755), 392-93, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁰¹ The story is collected by the following sources. *Guangxu Shuntianfu zhi* Vol. 70 (1889), 4434-35. In the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. "Ren Yao zhiji dian 人妖真極典," in *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* Vol. 70, 5251. "Jiao cixiu zhi bian 教刺繡之變," in Wang Chutong ed, *Lianshi* Vol. 41, 640-41, in the database Xuxiu Siku quanshu. Zhao Jishi, *Jiyuanji suoji* Vol. 5 (1695), 341, in the database Xuxiu Siku quanshu.

time, the story is likely to be adapted from a real incident. Putting the veracity aside, the story did obtain considerable attention from Qing scholars, perhaps because it echoed the problem of Qing society to certain extent. As historian Matthew Sommer suggests, the proliferation of rogue males in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced fears that these “rootless rascals” (*guang gun*) would prey on daughters, wives, and widows and jeopardize the stability of the society.¹⁰² The Qing encyclopedia *Lianshi* 蠶史 records two other similar stories about cross-dressed males disguised as embroidery tutors to violate girls from well-to-do families.¹⁰³ It is possible that frequent interactions between embroiderers increased the chances of illicit sex, which was due to the surplus male groups living outside legitimate Confucian families.

The dilemma here is worth contemplating. On the one hand, embroidery was the maker of female virtue pointing to a quiet, gentle, and self-disciplined woman. On the other hand, the glamour of an embroiderer rendered her vulnerable to male seduction. These polarized views toward Qing women resonate in the controversial comments found in the two Guangxu local gazetteers discussed in the introduction. The social understanding about embroidery was fluid rather than fixed, which explains why some Qing gazetteers claimed the frugality of the locality by diligent female hands conducting needlework, while others were proud of the frugal tradition because no embroidering activities were found. In individual stories and biographies, the subtleness depends on the manner in which a female practiced embroidery, how she managed the relationship between herself and others, and especially, when she was embroidering as an occult technician, who the viewer was. Where embroidering alone or with the closest family member was acclaimed, frivolity and meeting with strangers was deemed troublesome.

¹⁰² Matthew Harvey Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000), 13-15; 96-101.

¹⁰³ “Jiao cixiu zhi bian 教刺繡之變,” in Wang Chutong ed, *Lianshi* Vol. 41, 640-42, in the database Xuxiu Siku quanshu.

For some embroiderers, it was possible to hide their glamour as an occult technician, or as an attractive young woman. This is particularly evident when the embroiderer was a widow who was most vulnerable to male seduction. One solution was to embroider in a stationary lifestyle at a narrow space isolated from the outside world. One instance in a Daoguang (1820-50) gazetteer portrays widow Shen Shi 沈氏 who lived alone in a small attic for twenty years before she died. Her clothes and food were supported by her needlework, and all her jewelry was sold for building a tomb for her late husband.¹⁰⁴ In Shen Shi's story, the place in which embroidering happened played a significant role in divorcing her from outside disturbance, whether assistance or enticement. The repetitive movements of her hands echoed the long-term restraint, and therefore created an utter sense of morality that protected and supported her along the way.

Self-mutilation was another practice conducted by widows. Cutting off one's own hair was the most documented gesture when a woman took a vow as she became a widow, and from that point she would be living off her fingers. Cutting off a string of hair was a common way for either males or females to pledge their determination to certain things in both secular and religious practice.¹⁰⁵ Yet for widows, hair cutting implied a special conviction as this action diminished their sexual appeal, at which moment they vowed to be independent.¹⁰⁶ In many biographies young widows made their determination by embroidering with an unwashed face.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ *Daoguang chongxiu Yizhengxian zhi* Vol. 42 (1900), 2526, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁰⁵ For a discussion about hair cutting as self-mutilation, see Lu, *True to Her Word*, 189-190.

¹⁰⁶ Lu Weijin notices a shift in the cult of faithful maidens from what she calls "self-destruction" to "self-denial" – from extreme behaviors, such as cutting off nose and ear in the Ming dynasty to moderate alternatives, like cutting off hair in the Qing dynasty. See Lu, *True to Her Word*, 185.

¹⁰⁷ Here the term *goumian* 垢面 (dirty face) is used to describe the unwashed face of a woman, who focused on embroidery and possibly aimed to decrease her sexual appeal. One example see Cheng Shi 程氏, wife of Chen Qiyi 陳起義 in *Qianlong Huanggangxian zhi* Vol. 13 (1758), 1254, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

When embroidering usually increases women's sexual appeal, these young widows who relied on embroidery for living took additional actions to disassociate themselves with beauty as a gesture to reject men. The activity of embroidery, in this case, became a long-term persistence of repetitive stitches along with undesirable appearance to be kept day by day.

Conclusion

Embroidery was traditionally regarded as a boudoir ladies' privilege that distinguished them from rough-handed poor women. However, the status of embroidery was challenged in the late Qing as men and women, the rich and the poor, embroidered. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that embroidering was still gentry women's identity marker. It constituted good education that cultivated intelligent, quiet women; it brought women good manners and appropriate behavior through persistent and self-disciplined daily practice. Both gentry women and male elites paid more attention to the technology of embroidery than the actual objects. For gentry women, the practice *per se* performed their lifestyle. For male elites, it was the technical excellence that amazed them into viewing female embroiderer as occult technicians. The glamour brought by embroidery gave women a double-sided effect. On the one hand, female embroiderers were beautiful, elegant, and gentle and refined to be appreciated. On the other hand, their refinement exposed them to potential sexual violence. This menace was particularly evident during the Qing when frequent interactions between embroiderers and others offered opportunities for rootless rascals. The controversy over embroidery may also be explained by examining the technology itself. Standing at the pinnacle of textile making technologies, embroidery presents excellent techniques that dazzle its viewers. Yet this technical excellence

requires enormous time, energy, and resources to achieve, which provoked disapproval from Confucian elites and dynastic rulers. The TMC purse analyzed at the beginning of this chapter is a good example of the controversies embodied in one single object – while it revealed good taste and superb techniques of the embroiderer, the making of it consumed much time and energy; while it was an artwork of persistence, gifting it out might be inappropriate and illicit.

The controversy over embroidery was quite noticeable in the Qing dynasty, but this controversy was not static. Although the negative attitude toward embroidery existed throughout pre-modern China and remained among some scholars even after the end of imperial China, during the Qing dynasty, more and more male elites were willing to accept embroidery as a suitable activity and a morally correct practice for women. Their compromise was based on the fact that embroidery was already prevalent among the gentry class, and that the promotion of sericulture by the Qing government provided the material readiness for such practice. The acceptance of embroidery was further reinforced by poor women, who relied on this technology for a living as their traditional fabric weaving role was taken over by male professionals.

This chapter was an investigation into only one group of embroiderers in the Qing dynasty. There are many left out of the text - male embroiderers, professional makers, educators and reformers, missionary school students, and peasants. In the following chapters, I will explore the stories of various players who were involved in the life trajectories of embroidery in and after the fall of the Qing dynasty, from which to examine embroidery's identity in various contexts.

Chapter Two

Rank Badges: The Making of Authority

An Empty Rank Badge

The pair of rank badges (figure 2.1) kept in the Textile Museum of Canada were made to decorate the front and back of a Qing official's overcoat. The two rank badges are almost identical – they are embroidered in counted stitch on gauze fabric, with the sun disk, the clouds, and *lishui* 立水 at the bottom constituting major patterns and swastika symbols filling the background.¹⁰⁸ One badge has a vertical cut in the middle that suits the open front of the overcoat, and the other one is a whole piece to be sewn on the back. A noticeable feature that



Figure 2.1 A pair of rank badges (accession No. T00.4.6a and T00.4.6b-c). Photographed by the author.

Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

¹⁰⁸ The counted stitch employs thread that works through the holes on gauze to create patterns. See Dieter Kuhn and Zhao Feng, ed, *Chinese Silks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 481. *Lishui*, literally 'slanting water', is used to represent the deep sea. This is a design that echoes the lower hem decoration of dragon robes of the mid-eighteenth century onward. The late nineteenth century witnessed the popularity of a mixture of propitious Chinese symbols with auspicious verbal puns and religious symbols of Daoism and Buddhism on rank badges. See Valery Garrett, *Mandarin Squares: Mandarins and Their Insignia* (Hongkong, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36, 46-52.

distinguishes this pair from most Qing rank badges is the absence of the animal icon. Qing regulations specified that civil officials wear rank badges with a bird icon, and that military officials wear a beast icon.¹⁰⁹ But this pair has neither.

This pair of rank badges is associated with Qing embroiderers' adoption of applique, the technique of sewing embroidered patches onto base fabric. Instead of embroidering directly on the base fabric, the applique technique allowed the animal icon to be made separately. This gave officials the choice to have different animal icon-based fabric combinations and the option to renew the embroidered animal without having to discard the entire piece when his rank changed. In other words, applied rank badges were never fixed in appearance; they were always prepared to replace one animal pattern with another. Qing rank badges made with the applique technique can be spotted in museum collections around the world, and some of these badge bases have never been assigned any animal icon.¹¹⁰

My enquiry into Qing rank badges was intrigued by these empty and applied badges as they exhibit a technical mystery that no one has yet been able to explain – no existing sources depict how they were made and who made them. Adding to these mysteries, the technical discrepancy observed in these applied badges implies that they served a wide range of customers. In collector and writer David Hugus' words – “some (applied badges) are executed with care and obvious skill...among some of the most excellent work produced during this period... Others were... to my eyes, garish, crude and tasteless.”¹¹¹ If we consider the wearers of

¹⁰⁹ See specifications in *Hung Qing liqi tushi* Vol. 4-7, in Chinese Text Project.

¹¹⁰ For examples, see the rank badge with accession no. 91.116.2 at Minneapolis Institute of Art and the rank badge with accession no. 978.60.1 at the Royal Ontario Museum. Rank badges are sometimes referred to as insignia.

¹¹¹ Beverley Jackson and David Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds: Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank* (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 1999), 273. In comparison, perhaps the contrast of figure 2.2 and figure 2.3 may explain the technical polarization of applied badges that Hugus describes.

these badges, Qing officials, who were, in public perception, tasteful consumers, then applied badges seem to fail with respect to quality. Because of the technical discrepancy of applied badges, it is difficult to fit them into a niche.



Figure 2.2 A military badge at the Royal Ontario Museum (accession No. 972.163.37.a). Note the coarse edge of the applied beast pattern. The beast is done in counted stitches while the base fabric is finished in satin stitches. The two do not present a harmonious combination. Photographed by the author. Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum.



Figure 2.3 Rank badge for a fifth-degree civil official at the Royal Ontario Museum (accession No. 950.145). Both the sun disk and the bird pattern are applied with double-coloured, twisted couching threads to match the colour and technique of the base fabric. Source: <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/440067>

The treatment of this question first requires a survey of the development and regulations regarding Qing rank badges. The tradition of decorating official robes with badges was adopted during the Ming dynasty to signify the ranks of officials. According to Schuyler Cammann's study, it was customary for Mongol nobles in the Yuan dynasty to wear robes with ornamental square plaques woven with animal scenes on the chest and back. Although these animal patterns did not indicate their ranks, this practice influenced apparel decisions in the Ming and Qing dynasties.¹¹² The Manchus made some changes to the size and style of the Ming badges and approved several new alterations regarding the appropriate animals to be worn by specific ranks. During the Qianlong emperor's reign, *The Illustrated Guide to Ritual Paraphernalia* finalized laws regulating the proper birds and beasts for civil and military officials of different ranks.¹¹³

Although the Qing regulations seemed straightforward about who wore what, in real life choosing and making proper attire was a complex process. Except for those few officials who would obtain rank badges or official attire from the emperor as a special honor, most officials were required to secure the official attire themselves. This policy meant that rank badges were made by embroiderers with varying technical proficiency – some were embroidered by professionals of the court, the majority were produced by private commercial workshops, and a few came from the hands of the womanhood of the officials. While some were richly embroidered with various types of threads by multiple stitches, others were simply made without

¹¹² Schuyler Cammann, "The Development of the Mandarin Square," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 2 (1944): 74-75.

¹¹³ According to *The Illustrated Guide to Ritual Paraphernalia*, the following birds were adopted for civil rank badges: crane 鶴 for first rank, golden peasant 錦雞 for second rank, peacock 孔雀 for third rank, wild goose 雁 for fourth rank, silver pheasant 白鷗 for fifth rank, egret 鷺鷥 for sixth rank, mandarin duck 鸚鵡 for seventh rank, quail 鶉鴉 for eighth rank, and paradise flycatcher 練雀 for ninth rank. The beasts for military rank badges were: qilin 麒麟 for first rank, lion 獅 for second rank, leopard 豹 for third rank, tiger 虎 for fourth rank, bear 熊 for fifth rank, panther 彪 for sixth rank, rhinoceros 犀 for seventh rank, rhinoceros 犀 for eighth rank, and sea horse 海馬 for ninth rank. However, none of the Qing official documents ever explained why a certain animal was chosen for a specific rank. See *Huang Qing liqi tushi* Vol. 5, in the database Chinese Text Project.

intricate techniques and extravagant materials. Typical advanced designs in Qing times included, for example, intricate techniques to embroider the sun disk and couching gold threads filling the background (figure 2.4). These badges were commonly made by imperial workshops in Beijing and Jiangnan (Lower Yangtze), and especially during the high Qing period when the country's affluence was able to support technical and material innovation. Simple designs would use silk only with basic stitches, and as Qing sources reveal, it was not uncommon for officials with restricted budgets to use drawn patterns, or worn-out and second-hand badges. These badges were sarcastically described in late Qing fiction when *houbu* 候補 (people on the waitlist) began to attract attention during the Xianfeng period (1850-61). Many were commoners who spent their entire lifetime saving for a waitlist spot.



Figure 2.4 Rank badge for a fifth rank civil official dated to the late nineteenth century, using the techniques of “satin weft-patterned in gold thread with details couched in red silk cord.” Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (accession No. 950.100.336). Source: <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/362870>

The history of making Qing rank badges is thus associated with the history of bureaucracy, commerce, and fashion. Qing rank badges witnessed the material change in Qing

officialdom that reflected both personal situations and national fate, affected by time and location. Unfortunately, the mechanism of making rank badges during the Qing is little understood. This situation is partially due to the difficulty of dealing with the topic. Although extant rank badges are scattered worldwide through sheer volume, the textual sources that document these artefacts are scarce – other than several Qing regulations with succinct descriptions, other sources rarely touch this topic.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the artefacts themselves are difficult to interpret systematically because each badge is unique in design and techniques. In Western scholarship, the ground was broken by Schuyler Cammann’s early article, which was followed by Valery Garrett’s short monograph a century later. Currently, David Hugus stands out as a knowledgeable collector and scholar, having completed two monographs on the topic of rank badges.¹¹⁵ In Chinese academia, Wang Yuan’s doctoral thesis on rank badges constitutes an in-depth exploration of regulations and development of badges and mandarin coats during both the Ming and the Qing dynasties.¹¹⁶ Other than the above-listed scholarly works, rank badges remain mostly of interest to museums and collectors.

When it comes to applied rank badges, the mystery surrounding them deepens. As no surviving written works document these badges, the extant artefacts become the sole source of information. In the current scholarship, the subject of applied badges has only attracted attention from a few scholars, who suggest that applied badges began to appear during Emperor Xianfeng’s reign.¹¹⁷ As Finlay argues, the emergence of applied badges is attributed

¹¹⁴ There are two major primary sources: *Huang Qing liqi tushi* Vol. 4-8, in Chinese Text Project and Zhao Erxun ed, *Qingshi gao* Vol. 102-103 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 3013-64.

¹¹⁵ Schuyler Cammann, "The Development of the Mandarin Square," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8, no. 2 (1944): 71-130. Valery Garrett, *Mandarin Squares: Mandarins and Their Insignia* (Hongkong, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*. David Hugus, *Chinese Rank Badges: Symbols of Power, Wealth, and Intellect in The Ming and Qing Dynasties* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022).

¹¹⁶ Wang Yuan, "Bufu xingzhi yanjiu" (PhD diss., Donghua University, 2011).

¹¹⁷ Jackson and Hugus, *Ladder to the Clouds*, 271.

to social instability from Xianfeng onward – the replaceable animal icon constituted a practical solution for constantly changing officialdom, which was closely associated with the sheer number of *houbu* officials.¹¹⁸ Yet this statement is worth pondering as there is no evidence indicating that the Xianfeng era experienced shorter-terms or greater mobility in official ranks than were seen during previous reigns. This theory cannot explain the technical discrepancy that Hugus observes. It is difficult to ascertain if applied rank badges were made for any specific groups – the rich or the poor officials – and there is no evidence suggesting the relationship between them and *houbu* officials. In this respect, where do applied badges fit in the spectrum from technical excellence to inferiority, and will technical excellence still be a proper parameter measuring applied rank badges? This chapter will answer these questions.

I will first examine Qing rank badges that were produced by imperial workshops in Beijing and imperial-designated workshops in the Jiangnan region where they were usually gifts from the emperor to officials. I will then move on to badges made in commercialized workshops run by individuals, comparing them to those made by imperial workshops. Lastly, I will shift my attention to badges with inferior quality and study how technical inferiority affected their owners. Then, finally, I can place applied badges in the specific context and ask where they came from. I argue that the Qing rank badges were the embodiment of the authority of Qing officialdom in an astute way. The workshop management mode, specialized workers, and the quality of materials were all accommodated to achieve technical excellence. While official authorities retained expensive materials and intricate techniques, economic and practical strategies were adopted whenever possible. Applied badges, in particular, were invented to meet this demand for flexibility.

¹¹⁸ John R Finlay, “Chinese Embroidered Mandarin Squares from the Schuyler V. R. Cammann Collection,” *Orientalism* Vol. 25, No. 9 (1994): 61-62.

Strict Control: Rank Badges Made in Imperial Workshops

Imperial institutions responsible for royal use of embroidered textiles were established no later than the Song dynasty. *The History of Song* documents that during the third year of Chongning 崇寧 (1104), *Wenxiu yuan* 文繡院 was established as an embroidery office in the court, which was staffed with three hundred embroiderers.¹¹⁹ In the Yuan dynasty, multiple offices existed simultaneously to embroider royal clothes and decorations, possibly due to specialization.¹²⁰ Following the previous dynasty's practice, Ming ruler's use of embroidery remained extensive. The Ming established a system consisting of both inner and outer-court offices that responded to the imperial demand for embroidery. Within the court, eunuchs of *Shangyi jian* 尚衣監 were responsible for the attire of the emperor. As this small office could not fulfill the demand for embroidery and silk of the entire court, three bureaus were established in Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou – each being known for their sericulture tradition.¹²¹

Shortly after conquering China, the Manchus began to phase out the corvee labor that had been enforced in the preceding dynasty. The new policy permitted imperial workshops to hire professional craftsmen.¹²² The establishment of imperial workshops followed the Ming mode. In Beijing, the imperial workshops in the Forbidden City employed a significant number of craftsmen responsible for meeting court demands. In the Qing archives, the imperial workshops are often referred to as *zaoban chu* 造辦處, which produced a variety of objects for the court's

¹¹⁹ Tuo Tuo, *Songshi* Vol. 165 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), 3918.

¹²⁰ For example, *The History of Yuan* documents two offices handling embroideries – one was *xiuju* 繡局 that produced and embroidered textiles for royals and officials, and the other one was *jiangzuo yuan* 將作院, which was in charge of offering embroideries and silk. It was possible that latter was more narrowly focused on the court use than the former. See Song Lian ed, *Yuanshi* Vol. 85, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), 2147 and Vol. 88, 2225.

¹²¹ See Zhang Tingyu ed, *Mingshi* Vol. 74 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 1819,1822.

¹²² The second year of Shunzhi's reign started to abolish corvee labor. See edict in *Qing shilu Shizu shilu* Vol. 16, 146.

daily use, including ceramic ware, textiles, lanterns, glassware, and others. The Qing archives do not indicate the specific date on which the imperial workshops were established, but the name *zaoban chu* frequently appears in Qing archives as late as Kangxi's reign (1661-1722), and a number of new specialized workshops were founded expanding the size of the existing *zaoban chu*.¹²³ In his doctoral dissertation, Zhang Xueyu includes a table listing regular workshops operating during Emperor Yongzheng's reign (1722-35), which contains *xiuzuo* 繡作 (embroidery workshop) among a total of thirty-three workshops.¹²⁴ The embroidery workshop was later merged with six other workshops into *dengcai zuo* 燈裁作 (workshop of lanterns and tailoring), and this arrangement remained until the end of the dynasty.¹²⁵

The history of Qing imperial embroidery workshop helps to correct the misconception that only women engaged in pre-modern Chinese embroidery. On the contrary, the record suggests that only male embroiderers were hired by the Qing court. The imperial workshops referred to all the craftsmen *jiang* 匠, such as *xiujiang* 繡匠 (embroidery craftsmen), *mujiang* 木匠 (lumber craftsmen), and *tiejiang* 鐵匠 (iron craftsmen), which was a title with strong gender indication. In the archives of the Qing court, women only served as temporary workers responsible for limited types of jobs. Their genders are also specified in the archives, for instance, women hired for sewing were mentioned as “*zuo zhenxian nüren*” 做針線女人 (women

¹²³ *Zaoban chu* during Kangxi's reign changed its location from Yangxin Dian 養心殿 to Wuying Dian 武英殿, and it may have other locations during Kangxi and other emperor's reigns, but they were all affiliated with *neiwu fu* 內務府, which took charge of the internal business of the court. For the development of *zaoban chu* in Kangxi's reign, see Zhang Xueyu, “Jiji yu huangquan: qinggong zaobanchu de lishi yanjiu” (PhD diss., University of Science and Technology Beijing, 2016), 56-66 and Chen Feng, “Qingdai zaoban chu zuofang de jiangren daiyu yu yinliang lai yuan,” *Gugong xuekan* 2017 (01), 202-203.

¹²⁴ Zhang Xueyu, “Jiji yu huangquan: Qinggong zaobanchu de lishi yanjiu,” 66.

¹²⁵ Zhang, “Jiji yu huangquan,” 69.

who sew).¹²⁶ The use of male embroiderers was possibly due to, at least from a pragmatic perspective, the long-term retention of such positions, as men were free from housework and child-rearing. Generally speaking, such positions came with attractive benefits. Court-employed embroiderers were privileged with higher-than-peer salary, and they would have the opportunity to be promoted from craftsmen to petty officials managing projects. Exceptional craftsmen sometimes received rewards directly from the emperor, such as money, clothes, and goods for daily consumption.¹²⁷ A list of craftsmen in *dengcai zuo* during the Guangxu reign (1875-1908) indicates that all employees were banner members, who were trained from childhood to be sent to the court where they would receive preferential treatment through professional advancement and comparatively higher incomes.¹²⁸

Because *nanjiang* 南匠 (southern craftsmen) from Guangdong and Suzhou were reputable for their skills, they were regularly recruited by Beijing imperial workshops during the Qing.¹²⁹ In textile making, however, southern craftsmen were concentrated in Jiangnan workshops. These workshops, as will be discussed below, were renowned institutions with a long-established reputation. The Beijing workshop, on the contrary, was less famous, even though it was unfair to assume that embroiderers in Beijing had inferior technical proficiency. Moreover, given the fact that the three designated textile workshops in Jiangnan undertook the majority of the imperial embroidery orders, the imperial workshop in Beijing was likely

¹²⁶ Lin Huan and Huang Ying, “Qinggong zaoban chu gongjiang shengcun zhuangtai chutan,” *Ming Qing luncong* (11), 440.

¹²⁷ See Chen Feng, “Qingdai zaoban chu zuofang de jiangren daiyu yu yinliang lai yuan,” 203-208 and Lin Huan, Huang Ying, “Qinggong zaoban chu gongjiang shengcun zhuangtai chutan,” 444-48. A number of historians have briefly mentioned the existence of male embroiderers in the court and elsewhere, for examples, see Schuyler Cammann, “Embroidery Techniques in Old China,” *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, Vol. 16 (1962), 18 and Huang I-Fen, “Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 36 (2012): 78.

¹²⁸ For a list of names of these craftsmen, see Zhang Xueyu, “Jiji yu huangquan: Qinggong zaobanchu de lishi yanjiu,” 184.

¹²⁹ Chen, “Qingdai zaoban chu zuofang de jiangren daiyu yu yinliang lai yuan,” 204.

responsible for a small portion of imperial orders due to the limited size.¹³⁰ Then the question can be asked about how the Beijing workshop managed to stand out among high-level textile producers. This chapter suggests that for the Beijing workshop, its technical excellence to a great extent was a result of a strict system receiving direct instructions from the emperor. The extant archives of the Qing imperial court contain a significant number of patterns, which were approved by the emperor to be assigned to the craftsmen so that they could follow the patterns to complete the tasks.¹³¹ The Qing emperors were often personally involved in the projects conducted by the imperial workshops, and many times they gave detailed instructions and feedback to the craftsmen about the design and quality of the work-in-process. Yongzheng Emperor, for example, often issued orders expressing the need to improve the skills of craftsmen in the imperial workshops and the aesthetic quality of their products. Yongzheng particularly emphasized that imperial workshops should maintain the unique style distinguishing imperial goods from those made elsewhere.¹³²

Qing archives suggest that Beijing's imperial workshops were one of the suppliers for official rank badges. Although the main responsibility of these imperial workshops was to fulfill the textile demands of the imperial family, they also offered certain clothing items for officials under the order of the court as a special honor, including rank badges. Badges as a special form of embroidery often consumed extensive metallic threads for a shimmering look, especially for important components, for example, the dragon for a royal badge and the sun disk for a rank

¹³⁰ Scholar Zhang Yanhui's book documents several male embroiderers from the late Qing who served in the court to make dragon robes. Thus, it can be inferred that the imperial workshop did undertake orders of embroidering badges. See Zhang Yanhui, Li Wei, and Ji Tiantong, *Yanzhao minjian nügong yanjiu* (Baoding: Hebei daxue chubanshe, 2015), 138-139.

¹³¹ For a rich collection of Qing imperial textile patterns, see Gugong bowuyuan ed, *Qinggong fushi tudang* (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2014).

¹³² Yang Boda, "Qingdai zaoban chu de gongzao shiyang," *Shanghai gongyi meishu*, 2007(4), 14.

badge. Badges required high quality of metallic thread,¹³³ and for those made in the imperial workshop this specialty was emphasized. Because the threads were strong and stiff, they were mostly embroidered in couching stitches on the surface without penetrating the fabric. This process required great caution to finish the design without breaking any part of the threads, which had been pre-calculated to avoid waste. The imperial workshop certainly enjoyed the privilege of this luxury. To support the authority of embroideries made by the imperial workshop, high quality materials were deployed, among which special gold and silver threads were the most valuable. These were obtained through channels exclusive to the court, and the most expensive threads from Europe were used to maintain the exclusiveness of the court.¹³⁴

Badges made by the imperial workshop were gifted to officials as a special honor. To emphasize this specialty, sometimes they were embroidered with special characters, for example, *huang en qin ci* embroidered on one badge (figure 2.5). Here, Gell's theory is useful in examining how important virtuosity was for the efficacy of the badge as a symbol of imperial authority. In Gell's analysis, a court sculpture commissioned by the king would enhance the king's authority, although the sculpture was often created by an anonymous artist. Artworks thus are able to provide a channel for "social relation and influence." In the case of rank badges, because the emperor's power over his subjects was invisible, the embroiderer's power over the badges provided "a physical analogue for the less easily realized power" wielded by the emperor. Thus, the "technical mastery" of the embroiderer was particularly important because the badge

¹³³ Toward the end of the dynasty, the use of metallic threads became extensive as new technology produced cheaper metallic threads. Sometimes the whole background or the entire piece was filled with metallic threads in couching stitches.

¹³⁴ For more on metallic threads used by the imperial workshop, see Mei Mei Rado, "Encountering Magnificence: European Silks at the Qing Court during the Eighteenth Century," in *Qing Encounters: Artistic Exchanges between China and the West*, edited by Petra Chu and Ding Ning (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015), 61-62.

embodied the imperial authority.¹³⁵ The virtuosity was achieved through embroiderer's techniques, the lavish gold and silver threads applied to the objects, and sometimes the bold characters that distinguished badges made in the imperial workshop from those made elsewhere.



Figure 2.5 Qing badge of distinction, embroidered with four bold characters “皇恩欽賜” in gold and silver threads. Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (accession No. 950.100.188.A-B). Source: <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/440046>

Qing imperial workshops for textile supplies outside the court were established on the basis of Ming imperial workshops in the Jiangnan region – south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, where the mild weather, rich soil and sufficient water had long supported its sericulture tradition. Soon after conquering China proper, between the second year (1645) and the fourth year (1647) of Shunzhi's reign, the Manchus successively revived Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou workshops that had been abandoned in the late Ming. Unlike Beijing workshops, which were under the direct supervision of the emperor, imperial workshops in Jiangnan

¹³⁵ Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” In *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, edited by J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 52.

established a system supported by the combination of a professionally organized production line within the workshop and the control over the design from Beijing to ensure product quality. In Chinese terms, the Jiangnan mode is concluded in eight characters - 買絲招匠按式織造 (the workshop purchased silk and hired the embroiderers, and to embroider following the designated patterns), as instructed by the Shunzhi edict.¹³⁶

The Jiangnan workshops were responsible for a wide range of imperial orders, which principally included all kinds of silk-based woven fabrics, such as *sha*, *jin*, *duan*, *chou*, and *juan*.¹³⁷ Part of these fabrics were tailored and embroidered into finished and semi-finished clothes to be sent to Beijing. In addition, the workshops produced miscellaneous items such as accessories, furnishings, and fabrics for religious use according to royal demand. Among the three Jiangnan workshops, Suzhou undertook most of the embroidery orders from Beijing, likely due to the highest level of embroidering proficiency in the region among the three. The primary sources indicate that this role developed no later than the Qianlong period (1736-95). According to a summary reported in the tenth year of the Qianlong reign, two-hundred and forty-three embroiderers were employed in the Suzhou workshop, and this is compared with no embroiderers employed in the Nanjing workshop and a total number of five-hundred and thirty spinning, weaving, dyeing, and embroidering craftsmen in the Hangzhou workshop.¹³⁸ Next, in

¹³⁶ Fan Jinmin, “Qingdai qianqi Jiangnan zhizao de jige wenti,” *Zhongguo jingjishi yanjiu*, 1989 (01), 78. For detailed discussion about the system that the Jiangnan workshops adopted, see two groundbreaking articles in Chinese language – Peng Zeyi, “Qingdai qianqi Jiangnan zhizao de yanjiu,” *Lishiyanniu*, 1963 (04), 91-116 and Fan, “Qingdai qianqi Jiangnan zhizao de jige wenti,” 78-90.

¹³⁷ *Sha* 紗 is a type of light gauze commonly for summer use. As there is no English equivalent of *jin* 錦, this term usually denotes fancy silks that are polychrome and compound. *Duan* 緞 is used sometimes as a unit term measuring a length of fabric and can indicate satin weaves. *Chou* 綢 refers to “coarse textured and tabby silk fabric.” *Juan* 絹, on the other hand, is the most common type of plain silk. For a glossary of Chinese silk fabrics, see Kuhn and Zhao, ed., *Chinese Silks*, 521-29.

¹³⁸ Peng, “Qingdai qianqi Jiangnan zhizao de yanjiu,” 99-110.

the seventeenth year of the Qianlong reign, the emperor ordered that fabrics should be made in Nanjing and then transported to Suzhou for embroidering.¹³⁹

A significant portion of embroidery orders, including badges, were undertaken by the Suzhou workshop. Among the primary sources that account the history of Suzhou workshops, *Suzhou zhizaoju zhi* 蘇州織造局志 stands out with its rich details. This document was compiled by local officials during the twenty-fifth year of the Kangxi reign, with the intent to document the history and the status of the bureau. According to this record, the Suzhou workshop adopted a rigid system dividing the materials for embroidery into two categories – *shangyong* 上用 (imperial use) and *guanyong* 官用 (official use). Generally speaking, the quality of materials for official use were inferior to those of imperial use, and the time used for accomplishing official use orders were usually shorter than imperial orders. Both robes sewn with badges and individual official rank badges were made to be gifted to his subjects by the emperor.¹⁴⁰

The key to ensure the quality of Suzhou products was to use *gongyang* 宮樣 (imperial patterns) delivered from Beijing. When the workshop was located far away from Beijing and regular instructions were not available directly from the emperor, imperial patterns became an important bridge that mediated between royal orders and local artisans. Usually, the court artists designed and finished the sketches, which were to be approved by the emperor and to be distributed to the workshop. Sometimes real objects were sent to Suzhou as models to be followed. In rare cases, artisans in the Suzhou workshop would design original patterns, although these were subject to the approval of the emperor.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Xiao Ya, “Qianlong shiqi Suzhou zhizao chanpin ji jishu zhiliang wenti yanjiu” (MA thesis, Soochow University, 2016), 61.

¹⁴⁰ Sun Pei, *Suzhou zhizaoju zhi* (1687), Vol. 5, 7, and 8.

¹⁴¹ Xiao, “Qianlong shiqi Suzhou zhizao chanpin ji jishu zhiliang wenti yanjiu,” 45.

The operation of the bureau was supported by highly specialized artisans and a streamlined work procedure.¹⁴² During Ming times, the Suzhou bureau would conduct a complete manufacturing process from spinning to weaving and embroidering to finish a garment. However, according to *Suzhou zhizaoju zhi*, this was not the case for the Qing workshop in Suzhou. As the local market was able to support the silk supply of official use, the Suzhou workshop shifted its focus to creating a variety of textures and adorning woven fabrics. Craftsmen were categorized so that they only worked in specialized fields, which included weaving, making *yuanjin* 圓金 (wrapped gold thread), making *bianjin* 扁金 (flat gold thread), embroidering, drawing, and others.¹⁴³ The bureau hired supervisors (*guangong* 管工) and master weavers and embroiderers (*gaoshou* 高手) to oversee their corresponding field, whom were all administered by a headmaster (*zong gaoshou* 總高手).¹⁴⁴ These supervisors and specialists supported a well-organized system that ensured the effectiveness and efficiency of the bureau.

When the court demand exceeded the capacity of the workshop, a putting-out system often became the solution. Private workshops, often employing seasonal workers, thrived during the latter half of the Qing period. Constant warfare starting in the mid-nineteenth century destroyed much of the facilities of the Suzhou bureau for silk production and made reconstruction an arduous task due to the declined state economy. Private silk workshops big and small soon dominated the market. Some large-scale workshops, for example, Guangyuan Xiuzhuang 廣源繡莊, which held a division in Beijing, took orders directly from the court and

¹⁴² Sun, *Suzhou zhizaoju zhi* (1687), Vol. 10, 1-7.

¹⁴³ While both employing a thin layer of gold stripe to cover the surface of thread, *yuanjin* is wrapped with the gold stripe and *bianjin* has the gold thread gilded on both sides. Textiles woven with gold threads can be found in imperial items before the Qing, such as the Jin and the Song dynasties. See James Watt and Anne Wardwell, *When Silk Was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art in cooperation with the Cleveland Museum of Art, 1997), 134-35.

¹⁴⁴ Sun, *Suzhou zhizaoju zhi* (1687), Vol. 10, 1-5.

then distributed them to embroiderers at home to be finished.¹⁴⁵ Most private workshops accepted commissions from the Bureau, and then transferred orders to middlemen, who would then contact lower-level go-betweens or home-based embroiderers. In this way, the court demand was supported by a systematic involvement of embroiderers in the city when the bureau was unable to produce fabrics and clothes directly.

Flexibility: Commercially Made Rank Badges

The previous discussion only reveals the making process of a small portion of Qing rank badges. In most cases, Qing officials were required to secure rank badges at their own expense before taking office. Because badges were usually made with complex techniques and stitches, few people relied on the womanhood of their family, and the majority chose to purchase from professionals. The network of producing and selling rank badges during Qing times was a continually developing system in many respects. But from beginning to end, it was a system that performed well enough in balancing mainstream design and personal preference. Most extant Qing rank badges follow the same general features – they are thirty square centimeter panels with borders, an animal pattern in the center, a sun disk at the upper left or right corner, and with details filling the background.¹⁴⁶ Trending techniques are found in many badges, some of which include satin stitches, Chinese knot stitches, and counted stitches.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, Qing rank badges made in the same period usually present similar designs, which convey messages reflecting the custom and fashion of the time. Just to name a few examples, the pine tree was a quintessential

¹⁴⁵ Lin Xidan, *Cixiu* (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2014), 52.

¹⁴⁶ For size, patterns, and other features of rank badges, see Wang, “Bufu xingzhi yanjiu,” 113-54.

¹⁴⁷ Satin stitch constituted one of the basic embroidery techniques by executing paralleled flat stitches in rows. Chinese knot stitches make loops in the thread near the previous stitch, and thus also given the name *dazi xiu* (打籽繡 stitches of making knots). Counted stitches, on the other hand, worked through holes in the gauze to create patterns. See Kuhn and Zhao ed, *Chinese Silks*, 477-81.

pattern of badges of the Qianlong period, and Buddhist symbols were heavily used on Daoguang (1820-50) badges, representing a desire for respite from the country's many misfortunes.¹⁴⁸

Although these general trends were followed, each badge was a unique entity made with individual preference in fabric, design, and technique.

The maturity of this system is very impressive – the badge designs were highly consistent, yet they were made by individual embroiderers and workshops who were not closely tied to each other. Although no written materials suggest how designs and patterns spread within the network of workshops, the top-down influence of the court design over the local seemed to be predominant. The consistency found in badge patterns indicates that the court design had an extensive influence over local workshops and embroiderers, who would further disseminate court-oriented patterns and techniques to a broader audience.

It was a gradual process for private-owned badge workshops to spread from a few silk centers to a broader geographical area. As mentioned above, commercialized badges at first were only produced in Beijing and the Jiangnan region. Suzhou, for example, undertook most of the court embroidery orders, and was the leading region producing rank badges. As inland officials found it inconvenient to purchase badges from Beijing and Jiangnan, retailers across China imported finished pieces in advance for their local customers. This practice would offer local workers the opportunity to emulate their counterparts in more advanced silk regions. The considerable turmoil during the Xianfeng emperor's reign further accelerated this process. Because China, especially the east coast during Xianfeng period, suffered from constant warfare, trade routes were blocked between eastern regions and inland provinces, especially during the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64), which devastated sericultural centers in the Jiangnan region. In this

¹⁴⁸ David Hugus, "Chinese Rank Badges: Symbols of Power, Wealth and Intellect," lecture sponsored by Christie's Education, online webinar, July 2021.

circumstance, inland provinces started to make badges for the local market, and places such as Hunan began to earn a reputation for embroidery.

Before Xianfeng's reign, Hunan was a self-sufficient region without developed commercial networks. The local gazetteers indicate that women in Hunan practiced embroidery at home for leisure and self-sufficiency during the late imperial period just like many other regions.¹⁴⁹ Similar to most part of China, in Hunan rank badges sold in local stores were transported from distant commercial centers. However, this situation changed in the Xianfeng reign when the Taiping Rebellion devastated Jiangnan areas and impacted trade routes. Without the support of ready-made goods from outside, various types of local products, such as crops, salt, and tea were put into the market for Hunan and surrounding provinces.¹⁵⁰ This was an opportunity for Hunan embroidery as well. After several decades' development, by the late Guangxu reign, Hunan commercial embroidery had burgeoned to one of the four "*mingxiu*" (名繡 famous embroideries) with a reputable title "*Xiang xiu* 湘繡". The popularity of Hunan embroidery even surpassed some traditionally recognized embroidery centers, just as late Qing scholar Xu Chongli commented: "during the late Guangxu reign in Changsha, *Xiang xiu* flourished and exceeded *Su xiu* (Suzhou embroidery)".¹⁵¹

The success of Hunan embroidery was advanced by several key people. The famous Hunan embroiderer Hu Lianxian 胡蓮仙 was born into an affluent official family during the Jiaqing reign (1796-1820). She spent her childhood and teen years in Suzhou where her father held a position. Like most girls in the area, Hu was well trained in Suzhou style embroidery.

¹⁴⁹ Qianlong Huanan General Gazetteer Vol. 49 (1756), 3223, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁵⁰ Shao Hua, "Xiangjun yu wanqing shehui bianqian" (PhD diss., Hunan Normal University, 2010), 140-147.

¹⁵¹ Li Xiangshu, *Xiang xiu shihua* (Beijing: Qinggongye chubanshe, 1988), 41.

After marriage to a Hunan local, she moved to Changsha and spent the rest of her life there. Her embroidery business was launched after the death of her husband as she took embroidery as her livelihood. Hu's story is very similar to many widowed ladies in the Qing dynasty who supported themselves and their families with handiwork. Yet Hu was ambitious. She distinguished herself from an ordinary widow and expanded her business. Many of her biographies portray Hu as a sophisticated lady recruiting local women embroidering in her workshop, which earned her success and reputation.¹⁵² Among the female embroiderers that Hu worked with, Wei Shi 魏氏 is the one most frequently mentioned in all Hu's biographies. Wei Shi is always portrayed as the most capable assistant of Hu who advanced Hunan embroidery with her own business, which she started after Hu passed away. The biographies highlight Wei Shi's intelligence as she seized the opportunity of making rank badges as her starting point to enter the business. It is also said that her decision inspired a number of women who started to learn the making of badges. This description indicates that badges have played an important role in the development of commercialized Hunan embroidery. Without supply from outside, local females were able to fill the demand for official attire.

The increasing market demand for badges in Hunan also illustrates a larger political phenomenon – the increasing number of people who were allowed to wear badges. In 1851, when Emperor Xianfeng had just ascended the throne, the Taiping Rebellion burst out. To raise funds for the military response, the court announced the launch of *juanna* 捐納 – allowing the purchase of a spot on the waitlist for an official position. As an expedient way to increase revenue, the practice of *juanna* was implemented throughout the history of imperial China in

¹⁵² For example, see Yan Yunshou ed. *Zhonghua wenhua yishu cidian* (Hefei: Anhui wenyi chubanshe, 1995), 354 and Shao Luoyang ed, *Zhongguo meishu da cidian* (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2002), 425.

tough years and carried well on into the Qing dynasty constituting one channel to officialdom, but the quota and procedure was well controlled by the state. The purchaser was only able to secure a waitlist spot through money, while the access to the real position was rather tortuous and could take years or decades to fulfill. Starting from the Xianfeng reign, constant rebellions and invasions began to burden the Qing empire, and thus *juanna* became the norm as a solution to compensate the state deficit, which remained till the end of the Qing.¹⁵³ It is noteworthy that although the late Qing *juanna* system created an enormous group of *houbu* officials, the number of real positions stayed relatively constant. This resulted in a massive number of people waiting for a certain position. Although many of them waited in vain, their right to wear the attire of a certain rank was granted. In other words, the number of people who were allowed to wear rank badges soared in the late Qing.¹⁵⁴

It was against this backdrop that appliqued badges started to appear and became a popular form. Because the appliqued patterns are easily sewn onto and removed from the base fabric, it is tempting for modern observers to connect applique with the rise of *houbu* officials. However, I contend that there is no solid proof for this supposition. There is no evidence indicating that ranks were with greater mobility than before, nor do any primary sources suggest an increase in short-term officialdom during the late Qing. The increase of *houbu* officials might be an important factor to consider. However, if the larger number of candidates having permission to wear badges had any impact on the market, it would be a higher demand for badges. As a specific rank stayed unchanged, the invention of appliqued badges does not have a rational explanation.

¹⁵³ There is a substantial literature on *juanna* system of the late Qing. For one example, see Yang Guoqiang, "Juanna, baoju yu wanqing de lizhi shifan," *Shehui kexue* 2009, (05): 130-38.

¹⁵⁴ Xiao Zongzhi, "Houbu wenguan qunti yu wanqing zhengzhi" (PhD diss., Huazhong shifan daxue, 2006), 11-29.

To solve this puzzle, it is crucial to understand the development of textile technology and fashion system of the time. The late Qing period witnessed rapidly changing textile technology, including, but not limited to, metallic dyes, imported threads, and new stitches – such as *dazi xiu*, *lasuo xiu*, and *simao zhen*.¹⁵⁵ These changes promoted specialization in the commercialized market. In silk centers there were shops and workshops specializing in scissors, dying, raw silk selling, and metallic threads, which supported different components and processes of finished articles.¹⁵⁶ Hence a piece of late Qing clothing was often an assembled work of small accessories made in different places – collars, borders, and trims sewed onto the base to decorate the clothes. Under this environment of specification and specialization, applique technique started to appear in textile industry in the Jiangnan area and later prevailed elsewhere to be incorporated into the late Qing fashion trend in assemblage.¹⁵⁷

The applique technique certainly offered much flexibility for both the maker and the wearer of the badge, who enjoyed more options to consider design, taste, and personal preference. The animal pattern required advanced embroidery techniques and detailed delineation. Not so for the base, which could be made either with expensive threads or just to be simply decorated. To ensure the consistency of the overall design, the sun disk could be taken into consideration to carefully match the animal (figure 2.6). Applied portions would form a relief for a stylish look. This model was also smart as it attracted costumers who demanded a

¹⁵⁵ *Dazi xiu* 打籽繡 refers to Chinese knot stitch, *lasuo xiu* 拉鎖繡 refers to lock stitch, and *simao zhen* 似毛針 refers to feather-stimulating stitch. For detailed technical explanation of various inventive stitches in the Qing dynasty, see Kuhn and Zhao ed, *Chinese Silks*, 477-82.

¹⁵⁶ For specialization and modularity in late Qing commercial embroidery, see Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 68-75.

¹⁵⁷ Rachel Silberstein notes that applied cloud collars 雲肩 (*yunjian*) were first worn by fashionable Suzhou women no later than the early eighteenth century, and this trend arrived in the north by the mid-nineteenth century. See Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 30-35.



Figure 2.6 Two sets of applied sun disk and animal icon, tiger for a fourth rank military official (accession No. 978.60.2) and golden pheasant for a second rank civil official (accession No. 978.60.3) at the Royal Ontario Museum. Note different colours of the sun to match the animal – red sun to echo the red touch of fur of the tiger and pink sun that resonates the pink tail of the bird. Source: <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/434869>, <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/432797>.

convenient gender shift – the sun disk sewed on either left or right to cater to different sexes.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ The Qing government originally defined the wearing of badges by the family members of officials as overstepping; however, toward the end of the dynasty, these provisions seemed to have been disregarded in practice. The prohibition of badge usage for wives and children of officials can be found in the 1652 edict during Emperor Shunzhi's reign. See *Qing shilu Shizu shilu* Vol. 64 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 503. The surviving artefacts

Therefore, the availability of applied badges was reflection of the more commercialized market of late Qing. With the growth of specialized stores, pawnshops, and diverse customer demand, applique constituted a convenient way to update the dressed body.¹⁵⁹

Applique technique also reflects the market demand for affordability by a broader audience. When a customer could not afford an exquisitely embroidered badge, they had the option to purchase a nondescript base with partial embroidery.¹⁶⁰ Customers would also have the option to purchase badges that were not extensively embroidered, woven badges, painted badges, and second-hand applied badges from a pawn shop with the convenience of changing the former animal icon to one's own. Admittedly, these economically made rank badges were not an invention of the late Qing. Since rank badges were heavily embroidered, expensive textiles, the financial condition of officials would be a key factor affecting the affordability of such an item. Qing materials reveal that the financial gap between Qing officials was significant, and even during the prosperous high Qing period, officials who were dressed in ragged clothes and badges were not uncommon. However, it was during the late Qing, when the number of *houbu* officials increased, that demand for affordable attire increased the most. In this respect, the applique technique was not invented in response to affordability, and only some applied badges were made economically. Yet this technology did grant late Qing officials more convenience and flexibility in choosing the appropriate pieces.

suggest that badges with sun disk at the upper left corner were made for males, and that badges with sun disk at the upper right corner were for females. See Wang, "Bufu xingzhi yanjiu," 170.

¹⁵⁹ For pawnshops, see Hampden C. DuBose, "*Beautiful Soo*": *A Handbook to Soochow* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., 1911), 58.

¹⁶⁰ For affordability, see Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 59.

Wearing Rank Badges

With understanding how rank badges were made at different technical levels, we can now consider the agency of embroidery as it affected people who wore it. As discussed above, while exquisitely made badges with careful design and expensive materials by imperial workshops signified official authority, commercial workshops offered flexible, less-costly options to officials who were on a budget. The execution of rank badges usually reflected the owner's economic situation, but this was not always the case. The following section will explore some less-common cases in an effort to reveal more complex situations that badges may be able to illuminate.

Late Qing fiction is a fruitful resource offering depictions about rank badges. Especially in satires appearing toward the end of the dynasty, poorly made badges are often used as a motif to help develop characters. In the novel *Shisheng* 市聲, a Shanghai woman built up family wealth by collecting and selling night soil, and thus she was given the title Ms. Fen 糞 (dung). Ms. Fen's ambition was far beyond wealth, and therefore she purchased a fifth civil rank for her husband. One day Ms. Fen hosted several female guests, and she decided to dress formally. She took out a fifth rank badge that she had treasured but was perplexed with the sewing. Ms. Fen thus invited a local tailor and asked if she knew how to sew *buzi*. The tailor mistook *buzi* as "patches" (補 [*bu*] i.e. for mending clothes) and accepted the job with confidence. When the tailor received the materials, she felt, certainly, confused. Then after a few tries, the tailor finished the job by sewing an upside-down badge onto the coat. Without noticing anything, Ms. Fen arrived at the banquet with the upside-down badge. At the banquet, the wife of an official

pointed out the error, which shocked and embarrassed Ms. Fen.¹⁶¹ The story demonstrates that not only the execution of the badge, but also that the sewing mattered. Even with expensive materials and good techniques, careless usage of the item affected how the wearer was perceived by others.

Ms. Fen's story is also a good example demonstrating the gap created via material dissemination from elites to less educated groups. Symbols and designs many times were disseminated from top down, yet the associated culture and knowledge may only be intelligible to people of the same status and were difficult to be understood by vulgar and illiterate groups. Rank badges constituted important symbols signifying the hierarchy of officialdom, but Ms. Fen knew little about the meaning of animal icons of rank badges and the appropriate occasion for formal dressing. The female tailor seldom saw badges – for her, the badge was merely a fancy object existing outside her knowledge field. The misuse of badges was likely to be common during the Qing dynasty, given the fact that this knowledge was to be acquired by experience in office. Especially during the late Qing when the criteria for badge wearing dropped, many were unfamiliar with the regulations. Qing gazetteers constantly point out the problem of misuse of rank badges.¹⁶² On many occasions out of the court supervision, badges functioned as fancy material which might bring flattery to the owner, who neglected the regulations and prohibitions. When the badge failed to comply with the dressing rules of the occasion, the authority of the owner fell together with the badge.

¹⁶¹ Ji Wen, *Shisheng* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 1958), 113-18.

¹⁶² For a few examples, Qianlong Hunan gazetteer prohibited Han women's usurping of badges. “漢人婦女有僭用官陂補服大轎者，亦應禁止，” in *Qianlong Huanan tongzhi* Vol. 45 (1756), 2941, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Similar prohibition in *Tongzhi Changshaxian zhi* Vol. 12 (1870), 802, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers and *Guangxu Longshanxian zhi* Vol. 8 (1878), 284, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. For the misuse of rank badges as daily attire, see *Tongzhi Jianchangxian zhi* Vol. 7 (1870), 606, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers as one of many instances.

The degradation of the technical excellence of badges sometimes occurred intentionally. When the official intended to highlight his frugality, old and ragged clothes were worn to create the image of an honest and upright mandarin. This phenomenon was depicted by the famous late Qing satire *Guanchang xianxing ji*.¹⁶³ The novel highlights an imperial envoy who was commanded by the emperor to purge the extravagant atmosphere among officialdom in Zhejiang province with a target of people who purchased their ranks. The envoy dressed himself in ragged attire, which was decorated with painted badges. Seeing himself as a model, he required all local subordinates to practice frugality. After the envoy's arrival in Zhejiang, the official circle quickly switched its trend to adoring robes and badges from second-hand clothes and pawn shops. The prices for the old quickly soared up higher than the new. The envoy's emphasis on attire demonstrates the importance of appearance to the impression of status. When technical excellence becomes less impressive, the efficacy of wealth degrades regardless of one's actual situation. This mindset was sharply pointed out by the novel.

Following the fall of the Qing empire in 1912, rank badges ended their role as an identity marker for officials. However, their life did not terminate with the dynasty altogether, and on the contrary, they continued their journey in the hands of collectors in other nations, and sometimes to be recycled for new purposes. As the gate of China was forced to open by Westerners, Chinese artifacts came to be sold to many Europeans and Americans who were "enraptured by the sensory feeling and spectacular scene" of old Chinese goods.¹⁶⁴ Rank badges are among the most widely collected Chinese embroideries in the Western world, entering the hands of private

¹⁶³ Li Boyuan, *Guanchang xianxing ji* (Changchun: Jilin weshi chubanshe, 2017), 205-15.

¹⁶⁴ Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16.

collectors or museum collections.¹⁶⁵ They are technically marvelous, tangible, beautiful to look at, and symbolize “an ordered and wisely ruled old China”.¹⁶⁶ The craze for them started even before the fall of the Qing empire, which continued into the early twentieth century.¹⁶⁷ By the 1930s, most Qing rank badges had been sold to foreigners, leaving very few badges in China.¹⁶⁸

Compared with other antiques such as ceramics and furniture, the allure of textiles as collections from an Asian culture goes beyond displaying them at a certain space. Textiles are to be worn – the appeal of adorning one’s own body with a cultural object holds a fascination for many. Among the recycled Chinese embroideries in the early twentieth century, rank badges and sleeve bands (embroidered trimmings that decorated sleeves; often made separately and sewed onto the garment later) were most common as they were small pieces that could be dissembled to make items invented with new meanings. As art historian Sarah Cheang comments, because rank badges were suited at new times and locations, they were “in a constant process of becoming”.¹⁶⁹

When rank badges harmonized with modern designs and fabrics, they created a touch of fashion and individuality. Whether in France, Great Britain, or the United States where fashion played an important role in women’s lives, rank badges provided many possibilities for innovation and creativity. A 1901 British newspaper stated: “it is almost impossible to find a Fashion Paper which has not some adaptation of Chinese embroidery amongst the

¹⁶⁵ Some rank badges in the museum were donated by private collectors. For example, William Paul’s donation to the Met in 1929 included 150 mandarin squares and 80 coats. See “Chinese Textiles Willed to Museum,” *New York Times*, Apr 21, 1929.

¹⁶⁶ Verity Wilson, “Studio and Soirée: Chinese Textiles in Europe and America, 1850 to the Present,” in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, edited by Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California; London, England: University of California Press, 1999), 235.

¹⁶⁷ According to a newspaper report in 1888, there was an established craze for collecting embroideries among foreign residents in China. See *The North China Daily News*, November 9, 1888.

¹⁶⁸ “Fuzhi biangeng yilai benshi cixiuye jinzhuang.” *Shanghai shangbao*, October 15, 1933.

¹⁶⁹ Sarah Cheang, “Chinese Robes in Western Interior: Transitionality and Transformation,” in *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*, edited by Alla Myzelev and John Potvin (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010),140.

illustrations.”¹⁷⁰ The last few years toward the end of the Qing empire began to witness the growth in the export of “old China” textiles to the West, which fed the golden age of “oriental” influence. In the winter of 1906, the Paris Vogue highlighted new designs finished with imported “truly oriental garments.”¹⁷¹ The handsomely embroidered squares with rich use of gold, silver, and peacock-feather threads made themselves perfect materials on shining evening coats and gowns. The next year’s fashion circle in the United States soon embraced this late trend to have the Chinese mandarin bodices on nearly every afternoon and evening gown and to have sold Chinese articles that “have never been so numerous.”¹⁷² “Oriental” articles found their place in American women’s wardrobe as they were sold in many oriental and antique stores at affordable pieces. Comparing to a whole mandarin robe, small pieces like badges and sleeve bands were cheaper and more manageable for handiworks at home.¹⁷³

The transformation of rank badges into a modern lady’s fashion item could take place anywhere. While American women were able to purchase badges from stores and tailor them at home, some embroideries were already made into bags and mats in Guangzhou ready for sending overseas.¹⁷⁴ A purse kept in the Auckland Museum is an example demonstrating the motion and recycling of materials through regions and across time (figure 2.7). The purse is made from a pair of civil badges with an appliqued mandarin duck. By simply piecing together the badges, it retains basic shape and features of the original badges without much alteration other than adding

¹⁷⁰ “A Woman’s Thoughts,” *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, June 19, 1901.

¹⁷¹ “The Mandarin Coat Taken Up Here and in Paris – Chinese Lines are Modish.” *The Washington Post*, October 20, 1907.

¹⁷² “Various Styles of Dress this Season Show the Influence of China and Japan in Embroidery, Colouring and Workmanship.” *New York Times*, December 29, 1907.

¹⁷³ According to a 1910 newspaper article, mandarin coats were priced between \$40 and \$100, rank badges only cost between \$8 and \$14 or less. Sleeve bands were the cheapest, with a pair costing only \$1.5 to \$6. See “Rich Design from Orient: Mandarin Skirt Embroidery Makes Handsome Dress Garniture,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 24, 1910.

¹⁷⁴ “Oriental Embroideries, Some Effective Uses,” *The Times of India*, March 10, 1923.

two tassels. The museum data indicates that the purse was made in the Republican area when the old Qing badges were recycled to create new meanings. The bottom of the purse shows much wear and tear – whether it occurred before or after the badges were turned into the purse, suggesting extensive use of the item during its multiple recycled lives.



Figure 2.7 Chinese embroidered bag. Collection of Auckland Museum (accession No. 1988.18). Source: https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/discover/collections/record/am_humanhistory-object-9982?p=4&c=ecrm%3AE22_Man-Made_Object&class=Bag%2C%20Carrying&ordinal=10&lang=en-nz

In the new environment, rank badges regained their charm in a different way – not through the hierarchical meaning they represented but through the exotic cultural appeal that they conveyed. When the collector decided what they valued more, the symbolic meaning of the birds and beasts had little importance. Instead, rare items, such as military badges were priced higher. The beautiful appearance may not be the principal reason for the regained charm of rank badges as many foreigners collected old and ragged items. It was the unfamiliar technical excellence that granted oriental embroideries special charm – how in the world was someone able to create this miracle? And more importantly, the origin of the badges played a significant

role in locating the new identity for the badges – where did they come from and how were they made? These unresolvable questions created a distance between collectors and the objects – the mysterious technical excellence that they did not fully comprehend. It was the new “aura” that distinguished these badges.¹⁷⁵

Conclusion

Similar to the temporal span of the previous chapter, in this chapter I have examined embroidery of the nineteenth century. Yet different from Chapter One’s focus on boudoir embroiderers, Chapter Two shifted to embroideries produced by professionals in an organized, systematic manner. In both cases, the technology of making generated social relations that were attached to cultural meanings. Boudoir embroiderers mostly identified themselves as diligent, educated, and docile technicians. Rank badges, in contrast, created subtle social relations with the involvement of broad practitioners in this technology.

This chapter has analyzed rank badges that were made in various environments and on different technical levels. With some executed well and others made poorly, each individual rank badge was a result of negotiation between imperial authority and budgetary considerations. The imperial workshops relied on materials of top quality, strict supervision, and highly specialized professionals to ensure the authority of officialdom via top quality. Commercially made rank badges, in contrast, offered more flexible options to cater to the taste, affordability, and other requirements of the customers. It can be further argued the use, misuse, and recycling of rank badges created social relations defining how a wearer was perceived by viewers.

¹⁷⁵ Benjamin’s “aura” is helpful in understanding the recycled life of the badges as they stood as work of art with foreign origin, and thus created “the unique phenomenon of a distance.” In Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Sheila Watson, Amy Jane Barnes, and Katy Bunning ed., *A Museum Studies Approach to Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 228.

Chapter Three

A Business for Women, Led by Men

A Birthday Banner

This embroidery at the Textile Museum of Canada is a noticeable piece for its size (figure 3.1), with the length of 257 centimeters and width of 152 centimeters. This embroidery was made large because of its nature: as a birthday gift to an elderly lady in the late Qing, this item was supposed to be hung high and appreciated by her younger generations below. Because of the size, it could not have been homemade by any diligent amateur female embroiderer – no matter how skillful; instead, it was a product from the hands of professionals, which suggests the existence of a commercialized embroidery industry in the late Qing.

This embroidery shares features with many other typical birthday banners in the nineteenth century – joyful, celebratory red colour as base, the piece is embellished by immortal figures, and the main body is highlighted by golden characters in couching stitches. The top register of this banner portrays a female immortal, likely to be Xi Wangmu 西王母, who holds a *ruyi* 如意 and rides a phoenix, with two maidservants standing behind.¹⁷⁶ The surrounding area is filled with auspicious symbols. Two peonies and clouds signify *fugui* (rich and noble), while

¹⁷⁶ Xi Wangmu, also known in popular culture as Wangmu Niangniang 王母娘娘, signifies longevity in Daoist legends. In late imperial China, her image was often portrayed along with phoenix on art crafts on the occasion of a senior women's birthday. For a reference of a Ming embroidery depicting a similar image of Xi Wangmu with phoenix, see 故絲 00021400000 鳴願繡八仙慶壽掛屏 西池王母軸 at National Palace Museum. digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw. *Ruyi* serves as a ceremonial scepter in Chinese culture, usually carved out of stone or cast in metal. The Ming literati Wen Zhenheng explains that *ruyi* was originally used for “commanding the coming and going 指揮向往” or “guarding against the unexpected 防不測”, made by iron. Till Wen's time *ruyi* was mostly decorative. See Wen Zhenheng, *Changwu zhi quanjian* (Beijing: Zhongguo fangzhi chubanshe, 2018), 212.

five bats (*wufu*) are homophones for five nobles.¹⁷⁷ Swastika symbols at the left corner and *ruyi* symbol at the right corner construct a hybrid auspicious gesture combining Buddhism and Daoism that was popular in late imperial China (figure 3.1).¹⁷⁸ The main body of the banner inscribes verse in classical *zhuan* font. Smaller characters aside indicate that this banner was



Figure 3.1 From left to bottom right: birthday banner at the Textile Museum of Canada (accession No. T86.0733); Xi Wangmu, two maidservants, and three bats; one peony, one bat, and the swastika symbol; the other peony, the last bat, and the *ruyi* symbol. Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

¹⁷⁷ The use of images with verbal puns for auspicious meanings is very common in Chinese decorative art. For more on auspicious symbols, see Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols: Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought* (London; New York: Routledge, 1986).

¹⁷⁸ The adoption of religious symbols of Daoism and Buddhism in vernacular art was very common in late imperial China. See discussion in Chapter Two for swastika symbols on rank badge.

gifted to *yiren* 宜人 Lady Liu on her sixtieth birthday.¹⁷⁹ The names of forty-five people who contributed for this gift are embroidered at the lower left corner of the banner.

The creation of this banner as a standardized gift for such a joyful occasion was supported by a mature commercialized embroidery industry. On the one hand, the banner presents itself an ideal embodiment of the authority of the elder. At the upper part of the banner, the deployment of silk floss creates shining feathers for the phoenix that would fascinate the viewer from all angles below (figure 3.2). In the main register, expensive, metallic threads are sewn in couching stitches, which gives the embroidered verse a shimmering quality. The proper use of techniques and materials achieves a level of technical excellence that awes the audience. On the other hand, the banner is made relatively coarse - yarn is strong rather than fine and the stitches are sparse. The banner is made to be seen from afar as a close examination exposes its technical defect (figure 3.3). Hence the creation of this banner suggests a well-developed

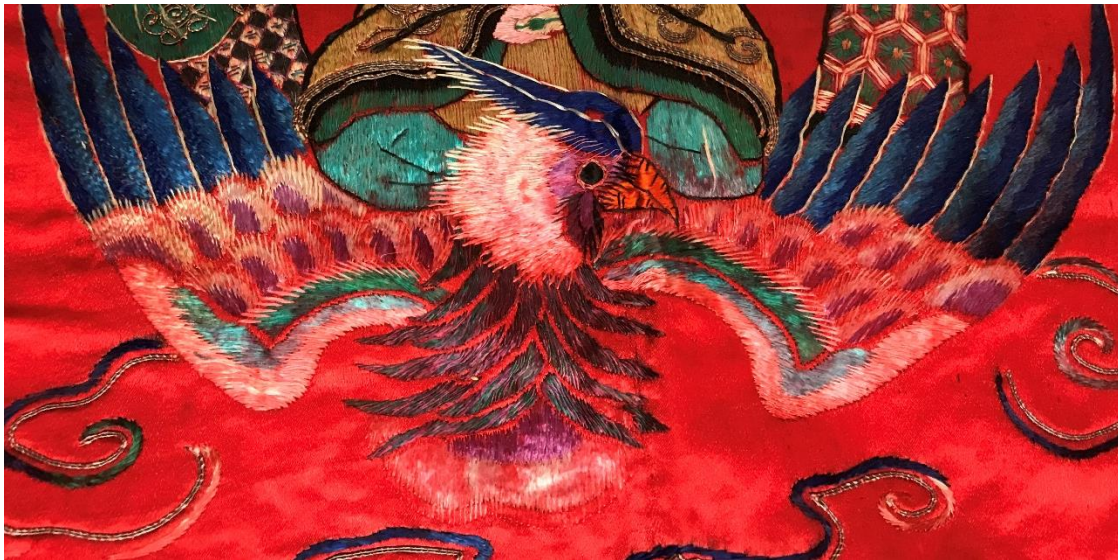


Figure 3.2 Silk floss that creates a shimmering visual effect of the phoenix feathers. Photographed by the author. Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

¹⁷⁹ *Yiren* as a title was offered to the mother or wife of a fifth level mandarin. See *Daqing huidian* Vol. 7, in Chinese Text Project. For the *zhuan* font, see discussion in the first chapter.

commercial network and highly specialized workshops in the late Qing run by professionals who understood market demands. The cost-effective measures ensured that the least money was spent for the best visual effect.



Figure 3.3 Left: metallic threads in couching stitches that created characters in the *zhuang* font. Right: example of less expensive and coarse threads that embroidered the characters on the two sides. Photographed by the author. Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

The practice of offering banners as gifts for birthdays began in Ming times within elite circles. Known as *zhangci* 幛词, the inscribed verse on a piece of expensive fabric, *shouzhang* 壽幛, was an expression of joy. According to the account of various gazetteers, the practice of gifting *shouzhang* on senior birthdays appeared in the Ming, flourished in the Qing, and continued into Republican China in many regions. The Ming elites appreciated birthday banners with carefully composed and handwritten long verse. In Qing times, simpler phrases replaced long verse as this custom extended to groups outside the elite circle. In later times some banners

only contained one big character “壽” without any verse, emphasizing its decorative function deviated from the original function.¹⁸⁰

As birthday banners became more and more popular outside the elite circle and emphasized decoration rather than literary value, professionals took over this job to make it a standardised commercial product. The deployment of embroidery, accordingly, joined with the fashion of the time to create attractive décor. By the nineteenth century, larger commercial workshops were undercutting home embroiderers. The image of commercial embroidery was the opposite of idealized embroidering imagery consisting of an elegant beauty stitching alone in an isolated environment, as discussed in the first chapter. As Rachel Silberstein argues, in the nineteenth century China had established a mature production and marketing network involving large scale production involving male and female, professional and seasonal workers.¹⁸¹

This commercial network itself presents as a mystery that baffles modern scholars as little is known about its organization. This problem is partially due to the scarce, fragmentary sources. In recent years, textile historians have started to reveal the history of the textile industry in Suzhou, but other embroidery centers in China, such as Hunan and Guangdong, remain almost untouched by historians. Accordingly, how was the technology of embroidery, which had once privileged gentry women, able to spread so widely in China and to be comprehended by so many workers from the bottom of the society? The involvement of both sexes in the embroidery industry raises another series of questions. As a birthday banner required multiple strong hands working collectively to stitch the tough materials, was one sex selected for such a job? Further, what roles did men and women take in the industry? What skills did they have, and did they receive

¹⁸⁰ For the survey of late imperial *zhangci* and birthday banners see Liu Xianglan, “Lun Mingdai de zhangci,” *Xueshu yanjiu* 2009, 7: 153-58 and Shen Jinying, “Qing shouzhang de yishu tese tanxi,” *Sichou* 2010, No. 8: 54-56.

¹⁸¹ Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 77-115.

knowledge in the same way? And, since men and women were assigned different social roles, how could this have impacted their contributions to the industry? Lastly, were there any regional variations, and to what extent can the entire picture be revealed?

This chapter is an attempt to answer these questions. By following embroidery as it moved from gentry to common women and by exploring the production mode in several regional embroidery centers, I hope to reveal the rise of the embroidery industry in the nineteenth century as a knowledge redistribution process. I argue that the technical excellence of commercial embroidery in nineteenth-century China was made possible by the collaboration of workers. Specially made threads, hired painters, middlemen and supervisors, and permanent or seasonal embroiderers worked collaboratively to finish work. It can be further argued that men, replacing women, took more prominent positions controlling crucial phases of embroidery technology.

Moral Discourse on Poor Women Embroidering

To understand the spread of embroidery technology, the changing environment for textile production in late imperial China as a whole needs to be discussed first. As Francesca Bray explains, cotton emerged as a comfortable, affordable novel fabric and the late Ming Single Whip tax policy invalidated plain silk as a form of tax.¹⁸² Consequently, plain silk became less popular. To survive, sericulture centers transformed from household production to large scale workshop mode to make fancy silk targeting the high-end market. That mode of production preferred to engage men in specialized weaving, and consequently forced women out of the labor market.¹⁸³ According to past ideals, “men tilling and women weaving” constituted a stable

¹⁸² The Single Whip reform implemented in 1581 transformed tax collecting from various forms, including textile products, to cash. For its impact on weaving, see Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 214-15.

¹⁸³ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 206-236.

gender-balanced society in which both parties of the household contributing economically and morally to the family. However, with the further redistribution of labor since the late Ming, women lost their traditional role.¹⁸⁴

The Qing government was determined to counteract this effect, promoting the cultivation of mulberry trees and the rearing of silkworms nation wide in an effort to offer women labor opportunities. Ancillary methods included the publishing of sericulture monographs and instructions and republishing *gengzhi tu* 耕織圖 (tilling and weaving pictures) emphasizing gender-balanced work at the village level.¹⁸⁵ During the Qing period the spread of mulberry trees was observed in all provinces, and countless new regions began to practice sericulture.¹⁸⁶ While this policy did not restore women's status as silk weavers, it benefitted silk production and thus provided sufficient silk thread that would stimulate the embroidery industry.

Confucian scholars seem to have accepted that the economic value of female embroidery aligned well with female virtues. Qing gazetteers documented talented individuals who embroidered for earnings for various reasons. But typically, they were described as lacking financial support because their men were deceased, physically or mentally ill, lazy, or otherwise incapable of earning a living. Textile work was especially valued when women were living with elders and the young. According to the texts, women's earnings were always for their loved ones – husband, parents-in-law, parents, and children if they had any, and either alive or dead (i.e. for the funeral). In Jiaxing Zhejiang, Shen Shi 沈氏 embroidered for earnings to publish her late

¹⁸⁴ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 206-236.

¹⁸⁵ Francesca Bray, *Technology, Gender and History in Imperial China: Great Transformations Reconsidered* (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 221-34. For *geng zhitu* at the village level, also see James Flath and Lu Wang, "Nonggeng, fangzhi, banhua: Gengzhitu yingxiang xia de nianhua." *Nianhua yanjiu* 2020 Winter, 85-94.

¹⁸⁶ E-Tu Zen Sun, "Sericulture and Silk Textile Production in Ch'ing China," in *Economic Organization in Chinese Society*, edited by W.E. Willmott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1972), 81.

father's poem collection.¹⁸⁷ In Rong County, Liang Shi's 梁氏 hard work was appreciated by local elites, and she was paid more because her embroidery was to raise the son of her late husband.¹⁸⁸ In the eyes of gazetteer compilers, embroidery was largely an embodiment of female virtue that helped to fulfill women's family responsibilities. Interestingly enough, Qing gazetteers did not differentiate poor women from elites as biographies of the rich and the poor were usually intermingled. Embroidering as a virtuous activity incorporated women across social spectrum. Toward the late Qing period, short biographies of poor women embroidering appeared more frequently in gazetteers emphasizing their economic effort. The assistance from embroidery was usually summarized into short phrases – for example, *cixiu ziji* (刺繡自給 embroider to be self-sufficient), *cixiu weiye* (刺繡為業 take embroidery as livelihood) and *cixiu yangjia* (刺繡養家 embroider to support the family). Those biographies did not specify for whom these women were embroidering and how they managed to sell their pieces. It can only be inferred that some women were likely to be involved in commercial networks earning piecework wages, especially in mass production centers. In some commercial embroidery centers, women were more frequently recorded as embroiderers. For example, the Qing gazetteer of Wu County, the embroidery center in Lower Yangtze region, gathered more than twenty short biographies of females who embroidered to support their families.¹⁸⁹

There were other channels for women to earn money via embroidery. Well-off families relied on hired women to embroider their garments and small furnishings such as shoes, pillowcases, purses, and mirror covers. These works were usually assigned as piecework for poor

¹⁸⁷ The short biography of Shen Shi is seen in *Guangxu Jiaxingfu zhi* Vol. 64 (1879), 7688, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁸⁸ *Guangxu Rongxian zhi* Vol. 20 (1897), 791, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁸⁹ See *Minguo Wuxian zhi* Vol. 71-74 (1933), 5327-6062, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

women to do at home during their spare time.¹⁹⁰ Other than this custom, women with embroidering skills could be hired by anyone – their neighbors or their kin, as commonly seen in gazetteer biographies.¹⁹¹ It was also common for women to sell their embroideries through a middleperson, oftentimes a sophisticated elder lady in the neighbourhood. One biography recorded a rare case in which a downtrodden woman was hired by a wagoner to embroider.¹⁹² Portable and flexible, the convenience of embroidery as a handiwork enabled women to work in all possible situations and environments.

The embroidery could be lucrative if the woman was diligent enough, and at least self-sufficiency was not difficult to achieve via embroidering. An account from *Jiangningxian zhi* 江寧縣志 described Zhu Shi 朱氏, who supported the entire family for fifty years after her husband passed away while she was in her twenties. Her earnings were solely from embroidery, which was adequate to cover the daily expenses of her grandparents-in-law and parents-in-law.¹⁹³ However, the earnings from embroidery were not always in cash. Sometimes, necessary supplies and goods such as food and firewood were offered. Primary sources frequently noted that women served as embroidery teachers.¹⁹⁴ In Shanyin 山陰, He Shi 何氏 was left two sons by her late husband when she was only twenty-seven, but her embroidery skills enabled her to be a local

¹⁹⁰ One example is the daughter of the Wu 巫 family embroidered for local well-to-do households, in the Qing novel Li Haiguan, *Qilu deng* Vol. 18, 116 (Qing written edition), in the database Chinese Popular Literature.

¹⁹¹ For example, the wife of Hong Fang 洪訪 embroidered for her female kins to support her parents-in-law after her husband died. *Kangxi xinxiu Shouchangxian zhi* Vol. 8 (Engraved in Kangxi's reign), 417, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁹² *Xuantong Jiandexian zhi* Vol. 16 (1909), 1386. in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁹³ *Minguo Jianningxian zhi* Vol. 20 (1919), 809, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁹⁴ A woman surnamed Du 杜 described that her embroidery was learnt from her widowed female kin in *Kangxi Yuanlingxian zhi* Vol. 11 (1704), 794, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Lin Yilun recounts that her mother hired a female neighbour to teach her embroidery when she was young. See Lin Yilun, "Cixiu xue," *Funü zazhi (Shanghai)* Vol. 1, No. 9 (1915): 1.

teacher, and thus to support the family for more than forty years.¹⁹⁵ Embroidery teaching was an ideal job for widows as they could spend their time with maidens in their inner chambers.

As the practice of embroidery extended more widely to the lower class in the late Qing, embroidery became more frequently presented as a universal virtue shared by all women. However, this did not indicate that embroidery was no longer criticized as a luxury. On the contrary, the ambiguous status of embroidery as both luxurious and virtuous continued throughout the Qing, and even into Republican China.¹⁹⁶ Whether embroidery signified virtue or not was more determined by time and region as well as the purpose of the text. The Qianlong era (1736-95) Wenzhou gazetteer, for example, stated that Wenzhou was blessed with an “honest and sincere culture and tradition” where “embroidery was not popular” among women.¹⁹⁷ Yet the same gazetteer celebrated Huang Shi 黃氏 who embroidered to support children after her husband died.¹⁹⁸

What Qing gazetteers revealed was a rather empirical approach of the compilers. In the Qing dynasty, gazetteers were usually compiled or supervised by local officials who would more or less manipulate the language to polish their governance. While the absence of embroidery as a key parameter defining frugality must be pointed out, the compilers carefully selected language to evaluate the existence of embroidery in the locality. The popularization of embroidery during

¹⁹⁵ *Jiaqing Shanyinxian zhi* Vol. 17 (1936), 683, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁹⁶ For two contrasting accounts see *Kangxi Taipingfu zhi* commented local custom that “women’s works mostly are involved with weaving and embroidering, and no skills of dancing and psaltery playing to pander to the rich 女紅多事紡織工刺繡，而無貼履鳴瑟投富貴之技” and *Guangxu Shanhuaxian zhi* described that “many (females) embroider in the capital ... (They) mostly dressed up in fashionable ways to follow and surpass their forerunners, which failed in acting in the (proper) manner of educated families 省會工刺繡者多...服飾多從時尚，踵事增華，反失方家舉止.” *Kangxi Taipingfu zhi* Vol. 5 (1672), 320, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. *Guangxu Shanhuaxian zhi* Vol. 16 (1877), 1116-17, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁹⁷ The original text reads: “文俗淳厚” and “不尚刺繡.” In *Qianlong Wenzhoufu zhi* Vol. 14 (1749), 739, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

¹⁹⁸ *Qianlong Wenzhoufu zhi* Vol. 22 (1749), 1852, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

the mid-Qing was acknowledged by many gazetteers. In certain regions the change took place as early as Kangxi's reign (1661-1722). The Zhangzhou gazetteer noted the shift in local customs, suggesting that "women practiced embroidery but despised weaving."¹⁹⁹ In Changsha, for example, during the Qianlong reign, women practiced weaving and embroidery.²⁰⁰ Yet by the Jiaqing period (1796-1820), women in the city were seen to mostly embroider but did not weave.²⁰¹ The description of this phenomenon in a local gazetteer was a negotiation with cultural convention and geographical conditions that varied significantly in various prefectures. The key parameter determining the employed cultural meaning of embroidery was the relationship between object and human. The practice of embroidery was to be condoned as a means of earning income for the family. Confucian scholars, however, were more likely to condemn a woman who wore embroidery but did not embroider. In You County it was said that "as for wealthy families, (they) embroider in spare time after weaving and spinning, and thus do not impede *nügong*."²⁰² Although this logic seems to contradict production and consumption, the emphasis pointed out that embroidery was justified as long as it encouraged women to be diligent.

Another factor determining the value of embroidery was the relationship between embroidery and its local sericulture conditions. The provinces of Sichuan, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Guangdong with warm weather and rich waterways were significant sericulture centers by the

¹⁹⁹ "其女子工刺繡鄙紡績，蓋俗一變矣，" in *Kangxi Zhangzhoufu zhi* Vol. 26 (1714), 2446, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁰⁰ *Qianlong Huanan tongzhi* Vol. 49 (1756), 3223, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁰¹ *Jiaqing Changshaxian zhi* Vol. *fengtu* 風土 (1810), 1252. in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁰² The original text reads: "至富室則紡績餘閒兼工刺繡，亦不害女紅，" in *Tongzhi youxian zhi* Vol. 18 (1870), 544. In the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

late Qing, and embroidery was a major source of income.²⁰³ However, the absence of sericulture in some regions had little impact on the popularity of embroidery, as suggested by the gazetteer of Xiamen: “the land is not suitable for mulberry trees, (and thus) women do not engage in silkworm rearing and weaving. (They) occasionally practice spinning. Only embroidery is the focus for deft-handed (women) to support themselves ... rich women regard this as aesthetic decoration and poor women rely on it for clothes and food, and this is why (embroidery) is not forbidden in respect of reason and law.”²⁰⁴ Therefore, regions with commerce and surplus human resources, such as Xiamen, became new embroidery centers. As such, the local conditions resulted in the advancement of commercial embroidery in several regions by the nineteenth century.

Building a Production Network

With changing attitudes toward embroidery over the course of the Qing dynasty, more regions began to view embroidery as a celebrated activity for the rich and a common livelihood for the poor. By the eighteenth century, embroidery was commonly practiced by urban women of well-to-do families.²⁰⁵ Rachel Silberstein demonstrates that from the seventeenth century onward, embroidery replaced weaving as the dominant patterning method on clothing, accessories, and furnishings at weddings, funerals, festivals, and in everyday life.²⁰⁶ As the demand for hired embroiderers and ready-made products rose, skilled women, and increasingly

²⁰³ E-Tu Zen Sun, “Sericulture and Silk Textile Production in Ch’ing China,” in *Economic Organization in Chinese Society*, edited by W.E. Willmott (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1972), 83.

²⁰⁴ The original text reads: “地不宜桑，女無蠶織，紡績間有之。惟專事刺繡工巧者自贍...富家女恃此為美觀，貧家女借此為衣食，亦理法所不禁也。” In *Daoguang Xiamen zhi* Vol. 15 (1838), 1257, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁰⁵ The gazetteer of Hunan Guiyang described that embroidery was popular in the city, and further commented that this was a universal phenomenon similar with other regions. See *Qianlong Guiyangzhou zhi* Vol. 27 (1764), 1675, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁰⁶ Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 77.

men, from suburbs and adjacent rural area joined the business to either work individually for affluent city dwellers or embroider for workshops.

The participation of lower-class people in embroidery production in the nineteenth century was the result of many forces. Certainly, Qing moral discourse alleviated the hostility toward embroidery, as discussed above. Meanwhile, the population explosion after Kangxi's reign provided a sufficient labor market.²⁰⁷ On the technical level, embroidery as a knowledge field belonging to educated ladies was gradually made accessible for the poor. Embroidery, as an intricate handiwork, consisted of a range of delicate skills. Two major components were underdrawing, the ability to delineate patterns on the fabric as the base for embroidery and stitching, the process of sewing threads onto the fabric. The latter, indeed, could be achieved by practicing as the term *qiao* 巧 (nimbleness/agility) was seen to describe poor women. The former, however, was an elite cultivation alien to most women from the lower class. In the late Qing, methods were available to ease the task of underdrawing for women. A common form of assistance for individual embroiderers came from pattern books, yet this still required basic painting skills to transfer the pattern from paper to fabric.²⁰⁸ In the realm of commercial production, male painters were hired to draw on pieces, which were later sent to embroiderers for stitching.²⁰⁹

As embroidery became a collaborative work finished by painters and embroiderers, productivity increased. The result was the mass production of embroidery and lower costs. While

²⁰⁷ For Qing population statistics, see Shi Zhihong, *Agricultural Development in Qing China* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 177-99.

²⁰⁸ Pattern books benefitted a wide audience including educated women. The mid-Qing novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 contains several scenes of girls *miao huayang* 描花樣 - copying patterns from paper onto fabric. For example, see Xue Baochai 薛寶釵 and her maid drawing patterns in Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), 53.

²⁰⁹ Rachel Silberstein notices that the professional painters were referred to as “white-chalk drawers” (*hua bai fen*). See Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 100.

upper and middle classes had virtually every garment adorned with embroidery,²¹⁰ poor people would also have a few pieces partially embroidered. When a fully embroidered garment was too expensive, small pieces such as collars and sleeve bands would be more affordable for the majority to partially adorn a larger garment. The sheer volume of nineteenth century Chinese sleeve bands in museum collections alone suggests the vitality of the workshop production. The nineteenth century commercial network consisted of professionals from their highly specialized fields. Other than painters and embroiderers who worked collaboratively, various ready-made materials enabled embroidery products to be diverse and with high quality. By the late Qing silk fabrics both plain and fancy were made in the Lower Yangtze region, Fujian, Shandong, and Sichuan. For embroidery, the most common silk fabric to work on was satin (*duan* 緞), for its smooth surface and simple structure to be decorated. The lower Yangtze River, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou produced satin of the highest quality. In addition, gauze (*sha* 紗) was a popular fabric among Qing embroiderers as a summer choice for the creation of counted stitches, with Hangzhou and Suzhou producing the best of this product.²¹¹

Unlike fabrics that were produced on a loom, yarn for stitching was easier to make and was produced widely. In Hubei, Henan, and many other inland areas, uncoloured or dyed silk threads were made locally.²¹² A specific example was Hunan, where boudoir embroiderers from well-off families traditionally consumed fine silk threads that were produced in Hangzhou and Shanghai. Toward the end of the Qing, as cost-conscious commercial workshops prospered,

²¹⁰ Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997), 265, n52.

²¹¹ Liu Jinzao, *Qingchao xu wenxian tongkao* Vol. 385 *cansi ye* 蠶絲業, 1-3. In the Unihan Databases. For technical explanation to *duan* and *sha*, see Dieter Kuhn and Zhao Feng, ed, *Chinese Silks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 522, 526.

²¹² In Henan Guangshan 光山, local sericulture mainly produced yarn for embroidery use. See *Minguo Guangshanxian zhi* (1936), 77, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. In Wuhan, regular yarn for embroidery was collected locally. See “Hankou zhi cixiu ye,” *Xinghua* Vol. 24, No. 38 (1927): 20.

expensive Jiangnan yarn became less ideal. As a result, inland counties in Hubei such as Mianyang 沔阳, Sharong 沙溶, and Hehu 河湖 started to make cheaper silk threads, taking advantage of cheaper labor and transportation costs to trade them with Hunan. The business relationship between Hubei and Hunan maintained throughout Republican China.²¹³ For most inland areas, such as Susong 宿松 in Anhui, mixed local threads and imported threads were available on the market.²¹⁴

In addition to silk yarn, metallic threads produced in Guangdong and Suzhou were commonly used to achieve rich and grand visual effects.²¹⁵ Other auxiliary industries included scissors, needles, buttons, and so on. While some regions developed reputable brands, embroiderers often had their own preference for different features of the product. The Republican embroiderer Shen Shou 沈壽, for example, listed her favourites in descending order as “sheep hair needles” (*yangmao zhen*) 羊毛針, which no longer existed, to Suzhou needles, and then to European needles.²¹⁶ As China’s market became more and more open to foreign trade, imported tools became a popular option for many. In Susong Anhui specialists made needles for sewing and embroidery, but they were replaced by imported needles in the early Republic.²¹⁷

As such, by the nineteenth century, China had already developed a fashion network mass producing embroideries ready-to-use with the support of commercial workshops and their raw material suppliers. Producing and consuming capabilities varied among regions. Wholesalers

²¹³ Tang Liqun, *Chuantong Xiang xiu wenhua de zhuanxing* (Changsha: Hunan daxue chubanshe, 2015), 3.

²¹⁴ *Minguo Susongxian zhi* Vol. 17 (1921), 1467, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²¹⁵ Qin Zhang, “Suzhou zhi cixiu,” *Guohuo pinglun kan* Vol. 2, No. 7 (1928): 4. For more on gold threads, see Dieter Kuhn and Zhao Feng, ed, *Chinese Silks*, 481.

²¹⁶ Shen Shou, Zhang Jian ed., Wang Yijun annotated and translated, *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo* (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2004), 47.

²¹⁷ *Minguo Susongxian zhi* Vol. 17 (1921), 1465, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

flocked to Jiangnan and took goods to Beijing and elsewhere to wealthy customers. Places as remote as Yunnan relied on Sichuan merchants to satisfy their needs for embroidered clothes and accessories. Regions that were self-sufficient were less involved in trade. For example, Anhui was known for its traditional culture taking embroidery as female education parallel with the local literate culture, and thus regarded embroidery as one of the self-sufficient skills.²¹⁸ But it is reasonable to conclude that embroidery in the late Qing was ubiquitous, either as practice or product.

Local brands: Suzhou, Hunan, and Guangdong

Between the late Qing and early Republic, several regions earned fame for exceptional embroidery techniques and distinctive features, which were labeled as *mingxiu* 名繡 (famous embroidery). Two regions were among the most famous: Suzhou for its long sericulture tradition, and Hunan for its innovative techniques as a new embroidery genre. Several other names were heard frequently – *Gu xiu*, *Su xiu*, *Xiang xiu*, *Jing xiu*, *Ping xiu*, and *Guang xiu*, most of which were associated with a specific region.²¹⁹ Other than these big names, less famous embroideries were also vying for a place in the hall of fame, for instance, *Han xiu* (漢繡 embroidery of Hankou) and *Lu xiu* (魯繡 embroidery of Shandong). Almost every region that practiced embroidery named its local brand and expected it to spread.

²¹⁸ See *Jiaqing Wuweizhou zhi* Vol. 2 (1803), 184-85. in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers and *Minguo susongxian zhi* Vol. 19 (1921), 1548, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. For embroidery's association with local culture in Qing Anhui, also see Feng Erkang, "Qingdai Huizhou xianyuan de zhijia he shengcunshu." *Tianjin shifan daxue xuebao* No.4, 2015: 23-29.

²¹⁹ The discrepancy existed between those names. *Xiang xiu* 湘繡 refers to Hunan embroidery. Most commentators agreed that *Ping xiu* 平繡 was an alternative name for *Jing xiu* 京繡 (Beijing embroidery), but it was debated whether *Gu xiu* 顧繡 (Gu embroidery) was the same with *Su xiu* 蘇繡 (Suzhou embroidery). *Guang xiu* 廣繡 sometimes refers to embroidery of Guangdong province and other times only indicate embroidery of Guangzhou area. See *Minguo Weixixian zhi* Vol. 3 (1932), 255, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Also see Ding Jun, "Cixiu yuanliu kaolue," *Guoyi* Vol. 3, No. 3 (1941): 21-22.

This highly competitive market entailed a mature system supported by experts and the labour of both men and women. Male embroiderers, as mentioned above, were certainly an important part of the business. However, in the embroidery business, men's roles were more diverse compared with women who were only responsible for stitching. Other than embroiderers, men were business owners, middlemen, and painters. Their various claims in the knowledge fields and technologies of embroidery business thus intrigue the question as to how men collaborated, or competed with women, and, to a broader extent, how gendered labor participation reflected men and women's economic and social roles in late Qing and Republican China. The following section will select and explore three regions from the above-mentioned commercial embroidery centers as they represented different forms of sex balance in the embroidery industry. I will first examine Suzhou embroidery which was supported mainly by women embroiderers. Second, I will turn to Hunan for both sexes' involvement in the making of embroideries. And lastly, Guangdong will be discussed for its tradition of hiring male professionals.

Suzhou

Suzhou is situated in Jiangnan, a region with mild climate and rich waterways that supported the growing of mulberry trees and the rearing of silkworm. Embroidery in Jiangnan as a leisure activity conducted by gentry ladies started after the Tang-Song transition, during which China's economic center shifted from north to south. The Southern Song period, in particular, with its capital located in Lin'an (臨安, modern day Hangzhou), provided an affluent and stable society for the growth of cultural activities in the surrounding areas. The technology of embroidery, thanks to Song gentry ladies, developed from decorative fabric into artistic work in its own right by employing finer, split silk threads to imitate literati paintings. The further

refinement of artistic embroidery in the following period climaxed in the late Ming. In Shanghai, a literatus Gu Mingshi 顧名世 founded his estate and named it Luxiang Yuan 露香園, where females of the family embroidered for connoisseurship, which brought lucrative income as well as holding a position for the family in the late Ming elite circle. Late Ming and early Ming literati commented generously on Gu embroideries on the technical level that the Gu ladies innovatively employed extremely fine, untwisted silk floss, and a rich colour palette that made their works little different from painting.²²⁰

In the history of Chinese embroidery, Gu embroidery was such a crucial phenomenon that, on the one hand, it represented the idealized boudoir embroidery imitating and surpassing literati drawing, and on the other hand, as a brand it commercialized itself and expanded fine embroidery outside of elite circles in late imperial China. When a young widow, the great granddaughter of Gu Mingshi entitled herself “*luxiangyuan gushi*” 露香園顧氏 as an embroidery teacher to support the family left by her late husband, with offering embroidery skills to students, the brand name *Gu xiu* was inherited by embroiderers outside the family.²²¹ In later years, an increasing number of embroiderers claimed the name of *Gu xiu* and participated in the making of Gu embroideries. These self-claimed actions greatly altered the nature of Gu embroidery, which was originally only presented in the form of album. In the early Qing, Shanghai embroiderers created pictorial embroideries on valance to be displayed to respond to the market need.²²² By Qianlong’s reign, *Gu xiu yiqun* (顧繡衣裙, Gu embroidery tops and skirts) was listed as a separate category from *Gu xiu shuhua* (顧繡書畫, Gu embroidery

²²⁰ For a thorough study on *Gu xiu*, see Huang I-Fen, “Gender, Technical Innovation, and Gu Family Embroidery in Late-Ming Shanghai,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, no. 36 (2012): 77–129.

²²¹ Xu Weinan, *Gu xiu kao* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936), 3.

²²² Xu Weinan, *Gu xiu kao* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936), 4.

calligraphies and paintings) in the local gazetteer.²²³ *Gu xiu* became a generic term taken by commercial embroiderers in Shanghai while its fame reached regions afar.²²⁴

By the late Qing period, Suzhou, the neighbouring city of Shanghai replaced it to be the famous *Gu xiu* maker. As a famous embroidery center, Suzhou enjoyed its own sericulture tradition. Ming literatus Wang Ao 王鏊 wrote “intricate, fine, elegant, and clean: these are (characteristics of) Suzhou embroidery”.²²⁵ By the sixteenth century Suzhou embroidery already established its reputation for its distinguished style. There were several factors that contributed to the excellence of Suzhou embroidery. Other than the sericulture tradition in Jiangnan region in general, as the Ming and Qing courts established imperial textile workshops in Suzhou, embroidery techniques developed from assignments of the Qing court, as discussed in Chapter Two. After the Taiping Rebellion, the decline of imperial workshops accelerated the growth of private workshops. Workshops such as Tian Chengyong 天成永, Cai Hengsheng 蔡恆生, and Huang Hengsheng 黃恆生 established long-term relations to the bureau.²²⁶ The success in imperial orders generated lucrative profits, which helped them to develop clientele outside the court.²²⁷ Suzhou embroidery earned a leading position in Jiangnan, surpassing and replacing Shanghai. Taking the Gu style’s reputation in making fine pictorial representation, Suzhou mingled it with its local embroidery. As Silberstein observes, the number of Gu embroiderers increased in the city and Suzhou embroiderers worshiped Gu Mingshi as their embroidery

²²³ *Qianlong shanghaixian zhi* Vol. 5 (1749), 919, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²²⁴ Lou Country gazetteer recorded that *Gu xiu* was practiced by many in and out of the town by Qianlong’s reign. “顧繡...今郡城內外人多習之,” in *Qianlong louxian zhi* Vol 11. (1787), 489, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²²⁵ “精細雅潔稱蘇州繡.” See Wang Ao, *Gusu zhi* Vol. 14, in the database Chinese Text Project.

²²⁶ Lin Xidan, *Cixiu* (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2014), 52.

²²⁷ Also see Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 103.

ancestor.²²⁸ In the late Qing period, the name of *Su xiu* was seen in written sources and used interchangeably with *Gu xiu*.²²⁹ Republican sources claim that “embroidered pieces from Suzhou and Shanghai are all taking the name of *Gu xiu*” and that “Suzhou embroidery is also named *Gu xiu*.”²³⁰

During the late Qing period, Suzhou embroidery was supported by a highly specialized system that fulfilled the mass production demand of the market. Suzhou’s embroidery practice was observed by Qing literati and Republican elites.²³¹ The Suzhou system largely relied on putting-out business - middlemen who negotiated between workshops and homestay embroiderers.²³² A workshop would usually hire male painters to design patterns according to the market need or requirements directly from customers. Then, after male painters outlined patterns on the fabric, materials would be assigned to ordinary homes for women to embroider and to be collected once finished. Middlemen were sophisticated agents familiar with every embroiderer’s speciality and availability. The wage was often defined by the complexity of the design and the amount of silk that was used for the product – the more silk, the higher the wage.²³³ This system efficiently responded to the market demand in Suzhou and elsewhere in China. While rich

²²⁸ Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 84.

²²⁹ Although in many cases *Gu xiu* was used interchangeably with *Su xiu*, in the late Qing *Gu xiu* was such a common name for embroidery that some primary sources mistaken the origin of *Gu xiu* for Suzhou, Hunan, and elsewhere. See “Hankou zhi cixiu ye,” *Xinghua* Vol. 24, No. 38 (1927): 20 and Qin Zhang, “Suzhou zhi cixiu,” *Guohuo pinglun kan* Vol. 2, No. 7 (1928): 3.

²³⁰ See “蘇滬之繡件皆稱曰顧繡矣,” in Xiong Yuezhi ed, *Xijian Shanghai shizhi ziliao congshu* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2012), 406 and “蘇州繡又名顧繡,” in *Minguo Wuxian zhi* Vol. 51 (1933), 3341, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²³¹ Early Qing scholar Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 commented that women in Suzhou were practicing embroidery. See Gu Yanwu, *Zhaoyu zhi*, 471, in the database Diao Long. Yuanhe gazetteer also stated that the delicacy of embroidery made by Suzhou women was incomparable. “女子...刺繡工巧百出，他處效之者莫能及也,” in *Qianlong yuanhexian zhi* Vol. 10 (1750), 403, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. For Republican sources, see, for example, Qin Zhang, “Suzhou zhi cixiu,” *Guohuo pinglun kan* Vol. 2, No. 7 (1928): 3-4.

²³² In local dialect, the activity of the middlemen was described as *fang shenghuo* 放生活, and the putting-out system is often referred to as *daixiu* 代繡. See Lin Xidan, *Cixiu* (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2014), 63.

²³³ Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 119.

regions and metropolitan cities were major consumers of Suzhou embroidery, wholesalers from places less developed in sericulture such as Northeastern China also took a significant share in the business. They usually placed specified orders according to local needs and then waited in Suzhou for embroideries to be finished.²³⁴

This putting-out system reared numerous specialized business centers that were based in suburbs or small towns, supported by embroiderers who resided in surrounding villages. Long-term collaboration resulted in a stable network operated by workshop owners, homestay embroiderers, and middlemen who were aware of the skills and specialized techniques of each embroiderer. This form of network emerged as early as Ming times when the town of *Xiasha* 下沙 constituted a center for the production of commercialized embroidery.²³⁵ During the Qing dynasty, several embroidery centers rose in the periphery of Suzhou. Changmen 閘門, a suburb of Suzhou, for instance, was the most prosperous market gathering numerous workshops.²³⁶ These embroidery centers in Suzhou and the surrounding areas gradually nurtured specialized workshops that distinguished one from another. *Xingtou* 行頭 (literally “gear”), for example, separated from *Gu xiu* workshops specializing in opera costumes serving local actors. Although some offered customized, exquisitely made *sifang huo* 私房貨 (customized goods) for famous actors, most of the premade costumes, named *guanzhong huo* 官眾貨 (general goods), were with coarse stitches and cheaper prices. In the 1920s, more than forty *xingtou* workshops were

²³⁴ According to a Republican source, this whole process took between two months and three months, depending on the quality and quantity of the order. See Qin Zhang, “Suzhou zhi cixiu,” *Guohuo pinglun kan* Vol. 2, No. 7 (1928): 3.

²³⁵ A Ming gazetteer stated that: “the town (of Xiasha) has many skillful craftsmen. Such as *boluo* velvet, embroidery, and wooden combs, portable chair are all delicate – other counties cannot compete (with the work of the town) 鎮多巧工，撥羅絨、紋繡及木梳交椅之類，皆精緻，他郡不及，” in *Zhengde Songjiangfu zhi*, (1511), 479, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. Gu Yanwu also mentioned *Xiasha* as an embroidery center known for delicate work. See Gu Yanwu, *Zhaoyu zhi*, 507, in the database Diao Long.

²³⁶ Lin Xidan, *Cixiu* (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2014), 58-61.

centered around the city's business center in front of Xuanmiao Guan 玄妙觀, along with more *Gu xiu* workshops in the same region.²³⁷ In the periphery of Suzhou, more specialized embroidery centers were scattered – *pingjin* (平金 goldwork) in Hengtang 橫塘, *dazi* (打籽 seed stitch) in Lishu 蠡墅, and *kelin xiulong* (刻麟繡龍 scaled dragon embroidery) in Xiangjie 向街 and Baima Jian 白馬澗.²³⁸ These workshops could be further divided into highly specialized categories with every workshop known for an exclusive type of work. For example, costumes of Daoist priests and monks were undertaken by Pudong *bang* 浦東幫 who took orders from Shanghai Daoists, Bendi *bang* 本地幫 who embroidered for local Daoists, and Jiangbei *bang* 江北幫 who worked with Daoist monks north of the Yangtze River.²³⁹

Hunan

Hunan province had been a marginalized geographical location with limited economic and cultural development until the last imperial dynasty. In 1664, Hunan was separated from the broader Huguang 湖廣 region, signifying the beginning of its further development. From early Qing onward, immigrants from the lower Yangtze region brought in skilled laborers who significantly contributed to the economy of the province.²⁴⁰ The development of textile work in Hunan likewise benefited from immigrants of more culturally advanced regions in Jiangxi and Zhejiang. Local gazetteers praised “guest women” from other provinces residing in the cities

²³⁷ Lin Xidan, *Cixiu* (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2014), 52-53; Qin Zhang, “Suzhou zhi cixiu,” *Guohuo pinglun kan* Vol. 2, No. 7 (1928): 3.

²³⁸ Hu Jinnan, “Wuxian cixiu gongyi yange,” in *Wuxian wenshi ziliao*, edited by Zhengxie Wuxian weiyuanhui wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui and Wuxian gongshang xingzheng guanliju (Wuxian: Wuxian wenyi yinshuachang, 1992), 63. For a detailed map of specialized embroidery centers around Suzhou see Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 104.

²³⁹ Lin Xidan, *Cixiu* (Suzhou: Guwuxuan chubanshe, 2014), 55.

²⁴⁰ For a survey of the historical development of Hunan, see Zhang Weiran, *Hunan lishi wenhua dili yanjiu* (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1995), 1-28.

who embroidered to fulfill women's duty with deft hands for locals to model. By Qianlong's reign, the provincial capital Changsha had attracted rich families whose ladies practiced embroidery as females from the lower Yangtze region.²⁴¹

Compared with more advanced sericultural regions, commercial embroidery in Hunan was a late phenomenon. Before the development of Hunan regional embroidery, local consumers largely relied on Gu embroidery that was transported from Jiangnan. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Hunan became increasingly known for advanced techniques following the most recent fashion. Xinning 新寧 gazetteer noted that women in well-to-do families competed with each other in landscape and figure embroidery and in new techniques such as seed embroidery.²⁴² As discussed in Chapter Two, the advancement of Hunan commercial embroidery was thanks to several key people. As the trade route from the Jiangnan provinces was blocked due to warfare and with the rise of new wealth in Hunan in the end of nineteenth century, embroiderers such as Hu Lianxian 胡蓮仙 and lady Wei 魏 took the opportunity to expand their personal businesses and established workshops in the city.

The early Republican period was a golden age for Hunan embroidery. In large part, the fame of Hunan embroidery was grounded on innovative measures and new knowledge absorbed from modern painting skills. In the early twentieth century, when it was fashionable to apply Western painting knowledge, such as the three-dimensional perspective, to embroidery, many started to experiment with new techniques. Yang Shizhuo 杨世焯, a Hunan male elite painter deserves much credit for Hunan embroidery's becoming a famous brand during the Republican

²⁴¹ The popularity of embroidery in Changsha is recorded in various primary sources. For one example, see *Qianlong Huanan tongzhi* Vol. 49 (1756), 3223, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁴² Xinning is a county located in south Hunan. *Tongzhi Xinningxian zhi* Vol. 3 (1868), 303, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

period. According to the local gazetteer biography, Yang was good at delineating “*hua niao cao chong*” (花鳥魚蟲 flowers, birds, grass, and insects).²⁴³ Based on his underdrawing, embroiderers were able to depict objects in a vivid, lifelike manner. Xiaoniang 蕭娘 (Woman Xiao), as Yang’s most excellent female student who recruited hundreds of female embroiderers, expanded embroidery into an industry conducted by more than one thousand women in the provincial capital Changsha.²⁴⁴ The success of Yang and Xiao allowed Hunan to pursue a national reputation for quality embroidery distinguished by carefully designed underdrawings by professional painters.

As such, Hunan embroidery gradually established *Xiang xiu* 湘繡 as a local brand and flourished in Republican China, earning a higher reputation than Suzhou embroidery. The innovative Hunan embroidery was elegant in design and vivid in depiction, and suitable for use on scrolls and screens. In the 1920s *Xiang xiu* was more expensive than *Gu xiu*, and catered to high-end customers.²⁴⁵ A Republican gazetteer claimed that “in the past *Gu xiu* in the Wu region had a surpassing name; recently *Xiang xiu* is better known.”²⁴⁶ In Changsha, *Xiang xiu* workshops were based in the city, while they distributed embroideries to homestay embroiderers. *Gu xiu* workshops that had earlier been founded in Changsha fell into decline and tended to manufacture only coarse embroideries such as religious and drama costumes.²⁴⁷ In major cities outside the province, Hunan businessmen established workshops all around major cities. Jinhuali 錦華麗 *Xiang xiu* workshop in Shanghai, for example, started to advertise in *Shenbao* 申報 from

²⁴³ *Minguo Ningxiangxian zhi* (1941), 3359, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁴⁴ *Minguo Ningxiangxian zhi* (1941), 834, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁴⁵ *Minguo Xuxiu jiangdu Xianzhi* Vol. 6 (1926), 464-65, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁴⁶ “昔人吳中顧繡擅名，近時則稱湘繡，” in *Minguo Huayangxian zhi* Vol. 34 (1934), 2281, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁴⁷ “Cixiu ye diaocha.” *Shiye zazhi* No. 51 (1922): 7.

1920 to attract local customers.²⁴⁸ In Beijing, Quanyechang 勸業場 was the center for *Xiang xiu* workshops such as Yu Caixia 虞彩霞, Wu Caixia 吳彩霞, and Yanxiang 燕湘, making embroidered human figures, landscapes, plants and flowers, and calligraphy in the form of valance, screen, scroll and more for several decades.²⁴⁹ The business model varied among individuals: while some mobilized and trained local women to embroider,²⁵⁰ others insisted on transporting hometown products for quality and cheap labor.²⁵¹ But all workshops would hire male painters to be responsible for the design.

Guangdong

The Suzhou and Hunan examples demonstrate how, during late Qing and early Republican China, homestay women were involved in the network of commercial embroidery, collaborating with male painters, middlemen, and business owners. This phenomenon was not limited to these two provinces. In many other regions with vibrant commerce and surplus labor, such as Sichuan and Shandong, women embroidered for a living. Yet male embroiderers were welcomed for their physical strength, which helped them to handle strong metallic threads, as well as for their availability for full-time, on-site projects. Such was the case in Guangdong. In the province of Guangdong, commercial embroidery making was centered on two regions, one in Chaozhou 潮州 and its surrounding areas of Shantou 汕頭, Chao'an 潮安 and Chenghai 澄海, and the other in Guangzhou 廣州 and surrounding areas such as Foshan 佛山, Nanhai 南海,

²⁴⁸ A quick search in Da Cheng Old Journals Full Text Database indicates that between 1920 and 1927 Jinhuali workshop posted four-hundred and sixty-three advertisements on *Shenbao*.

²⁴⁹ “Gudu cixiuye jinkuang.” *Shishi xinbao wankan*, October 5, 1948.

²⁵⁰ For example, see Hunan embroidery workshops in Wuhan, “Hankou zhi cixiu ye,” *Xinghua* Vol. 24, No. 38 (1927): 20-21.

²⁵¹ For example, see the business mode of workshop Zhongmeiyi 中美一. In Wan Jieshao, “Xiang xiu de fazhan,” *Funü zazhi* Vol. 12, No. 1 (1926): 35-37.

Panyu 番禺 and Shunde 顺德.²⁵² The development and local features of Guangdong embroidery was inseparable from the region's maritime trade.²⁵³ That trade increased when the Qing dynasty asserted control of the region in 1685, and flourished after 1757 when the Qianlong emperor designated Guangzhou as the only port for trade with ships from Europe and Southeast Asia. The benefit to Guangdong's sericulture and embroidery industry was inestimable.²⁵⁴

Unlike most Chinese embroidery centers that mainly employed silk yarn to stitch onto the fabric, Guangdong embroiderers tended to explore all possible materials to enhance the distinctiveness and exoticism of the work. Early Qing Guangdong literatus Qu Dajun 屈大均 described embroidery in his geographical monograph as follows: “and there (is another way) of using peacock feathers to make yarn to embroider badges, cloud collars, and sleeve bands. (The embroidery) is adorable with golden and green colours.”²⁵⁵ Of the materials that were utilized, including peacock feathers, pearls, beads, and others, metallic threads were the most representative local feature. Guangdong embroidery featured extensive use of metallic thread for a dazzling visual effect. Some of the typical strategies included *zhonggong xiu* (heavy embroidery 重工繡) and *mandi xiu* (full-fabric embroidery 滿地繡). Other than intensively applied couching stitches, Guangdong embroidery employed techniques of *dian* (墊 insert fabrics

²⁵² In Chinese literature, embroidery centered on Guangzhou is often given the name *Guang xiu* 廣繡 whereas embroidery centered around Chaozhou is named *Yue xiu* 粵繡. But sometimes, there is a discrepancy in naming embroidery in different areas of Guangdong, for example, embroidery of the entire province can also be referred to as *Guang xiu*. To avoid confusion, this study adopts the term Guangdong embroidery to indicate embroidery of the province.

²⁵³ Shunde gazetteer describes that local embroidery was exported to other regions and overseas. See *Xianfeng Shundexian zhi* Vol. 3 (Engraved in Xianfeng reign), 286, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁵⁴ E-Tu Zen Sun, “Sericulture and Silk Textile Production in Ch’ing China,” 98.

²⁵⁵ “又有以孔雀毛績為線縷，以繡譜子及雲肩袖口，金翠奪目，亦可愛。” In Qu Dajun, *Guangdong xinyu zhu*, Li Yuzhong, Deng Guangli, Lin Weichun, Xiong Fulin, Chen Weijun annotated, (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 1991), 376.

underneath), *tie* (貼 applique), and *pin* (拼 collage) to add fabric on the surface to create reliefs.²⁵⁶

Drama costumes represent the techniques of Guangdong embroidery. By early Republican China, the commercial embroidery of Guangzhou was supported by specialized workshops in exports, drama costumes, landscapes, and others. For example, Zhuangyuan Fang 狀元坊, known as “the street of drama costumes 戲服一條街”, was the most famous costume center gathering numerous workshops.²⁵⁷ The largest workshop Yu Maolong 余茂隆 hired more than ten professionals working onsite to make various stage costumes and tools.²⁵⁸ Many times, designing, underdrawing, and high-profile embroidering was done at the workshop with less important embroidering sent out to homestay female embroiderers to be finished. A Daoguang (1820-50) literati account depicted the glamour of Guangdong drama as follows: “as for the extravagance of the attire, every appearance on the stage (of the actors) is fabulous with golden and green. (The setting is as dazzling as) a tower with seven types of treasures – a close look is impossible.”²⁵⁹ For a dazzling visual effect from the audience, drama costumes did not require fine stitches, but the materials were to be shiny and rich.

The Guangdong male hands were effective in putting together heavy materials and large pieces, taking the leading position in the local business. A folk song writes that: “*shelao* embroiderer, raises the family and makes a living. Skills are refined and good, but (he) counts on

²⁵⁶ Sun Peilan, *Zhongguo cixiu shi* (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2007), 98-99.

²⁵⁷ Huang Boli, *Jinxiu Lingnan: Guangdong cixiu* (Guangzhou: Guangdong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2009), 32-33. The title of the *fang* (alley) was to celebrate a local *zhuangyuan* who had taken the first place in an imperial examination.

²⁵⁸ Guangzhou shi wenhua guan ed, *Guangzhou shi fei wuzhi wenhua yichan minglu tudian* (Guangzhou: Guangzhou chubanshe, 2019), 69.

²⁵⁹ “然其服飾豪侈，每登場，金翠迷離，如七寶樓台，令人不可逼視，” in Yang Zhangsheng, *Menghua suobu*, in the database Chinese Text Project.

the middleman. If there are no rich customers, clothes and foods are difficult to obtain.”²⁶⁰ The dialect *shelao* refers to *hualao* 花佬, male embroiderers, who are described here as reliable supporters of a household. While both women and men were involved in production of commercial embroidery, men took the more important role as master embroiderers. They took charge of the most important part of embroidery in the workshop, while lesser parts were outsourced to homestay female workers. The guild that Guangzhou male embroiderers formed, Qilan Tang 綺蘭堂, specifically forbade female embroiderers from entering the guild or apprenticing.²⁶¹

Although some modern sources claim the exclusiveness of male embroidering culture of Guangzhou, the employment of male embroiderers was seen elsewhere in various localities in the Qing dynasty. Yunnan Zhaotong 昭通 gazetteers commented on the universal phenomenon that rank badges were coming from male work, while the Huayang 華陽 gazetteer of Sichuan claimed that local professional embroiderers were all men.²⁶² In these regions, it seems that male embroiderers usually took a more important role than their female counterparts. This distinction, however, did not indicate the subordination of female techniques to male. One Guangzhou embroiderer recounted that in an embroiderer’s family, sons and daughters were taught the same knowledge, and many female embroiderers were as good as men.²⁶³ The advantage of male embroiderers, in most cases, was that they were free to enter formal apprenticeships. The access to embroidery technology for most women, in contrast, was based on the traditional mode of

²⁶⁰ The original text reads: “賒佬繡工，養家活口。工藝精好，仲靠攬頭。若無闊佬，衣食難求。” In Cai Hongsheng, *Guangzhou jiang tuzhi* (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2019), 54.

²⁶¹ Huang Boli, *Jinxiu lingnan*, 90.

²⁶² *Minguo Zhaotongxian zhi gao* Vol. 6 (1938), 457, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. *Minguo Huayangxian zhi* Vol. 34 (1934), 2281, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

²⁶³ Huang Yan. “Zuihou de ‘hualao’: Guang xiu daibiaoxing chuanchengren Xu Chiguang fangtanlu.” *Wenhua yichan* 2017, 3: 133-34.

teaching and learning between female family members. Because of the engagement of full-time, on-site employment, men were more easily able to communicate with each other, apprentice, and form the guild to protect their interests. As a result, male embroiderers were entitled to higher wages, and were more easily spotted in public (figure 3.4). The birthday banner analyzed at the beginning of the chapter further illustrates a common advantage of men – a higher literacy rate than women that granted them the privilege as text embroiderers interpreting elite knowledge.



Figure 3.4 “Man Embroidering Silk in a Frame,” taken in Beijing by Hedda Morrison, ca. 1933-46. Source:

Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University.

https://digitalcollections.library.harvard.edu/catalog/W89844_URN-3:FHCL:8095

If the above-discussed contrast between the two genders demonstrates a knowledge hierarchy, then men’s domination in the business extended beyond their role as embroiderers. Like other regions, men in the Guangdong embroidery industry took the position of painters. As one Guangdong embroiderer described the relationship between painting and embroidery: “to

use the techniques of *Guang xiu* is to obey the demand of the painting”,²⁶⁴ embroidery was subject to the design. Moreover, men were responsible for crucial sessions and leading roles of the workshop, such as management and middlemen. As a Guangzhou folk song reveals, “skills are refined and good, but (the embroiderer) counts on the middleman,”²⁶⁵ men were important middlepersons connecting with the outside, negotiating, and taking orders, which was vital for the survival of a workshop.

On the other hand, a dichotomy between men and women in the embroidery industry was not necessarily rigid. The study of ‘self-combing women’ (*zishu nü* 自梳女) proves that the biological gender did not always set male and female embroiderers apart. According to the local tradition, the hair of a Guangdong girl would be combed by a senior lady into a bun on her wedding day, signifying the change to her marriage status. ‘Self-combing women’, refers to girls who combed their own hair, indicating their determination to remain single.²⁶⁶ The number of self-combing women reached its height from mid-Qing to Republican China and was mostly popular in textile centers in Guangdong. The employment offered by the textile industry gave local women sufficient financial support to live independently. According to Stockard’s interviews, women in Guangdong sericulture centers engaged in various labors including silk reeling, weaving, and embroidering and were paid most generously in a full-time occupation.²⁶⁷ In the embroidery workshops, these women were able to engage in full-day production without

²⁶⁴ “用廣繡的技藝去服從這幅畫的要求。” In Huang Yan, “Zuihou de ‘hualao’: Guang xiu daibiaoxing chuanchengren Xu Chiguang fangtanlu.” *Wenhua yichan* 2017, 3: 139.

²⁶⁵ In Cai Hongsheng, *Guangzhou jiang tuzhi* (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2019), 54.

²⁶⁶ For the study of self-combing women in Chinese language, see for example, Wan Jianzhong and Lin Mingzhu, “Nanyang zishunü de lishi kaocha,” *Tianjin shifan daxue xuebao* No.6: 25-29 and Shao Yifei, “Shixi zishunü xisu de qiyuan goucheng he jiben tezheng: Yi Guangzhou diqu zishunü xisu weili,” *Wenhua yichan* 2012, 2: 143-151.

²⁶⁷ Janice Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860-1930* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989), 14-21, 148-59. For marriage-resistance women in Guangdong, also see Marjorie Topley, “Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung,” in Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke edited, *Women in Chinese Society*, 67-88. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975.

concerns from their family responsibility. It was thus the social gender rather than biological gender that defined the role an embroiderer played in the industry.

Commercial embroidery did not begin with the separation of two sexes. As Republican scholar Xu Weinan 徐蔚南 observed: “up to Qianlong’s reign of the Qing era, half of *Gu xiu* embroideries came from male hands in addition to female embroiderers.”²⁶⁸ It seems that when male workers first stepped into the business, they acted like counterparts to women embroiderers without claiming more significant roles. The division was a later development as men and women worked in separate places. Women were involved in the universally adopted putting-out system to work at home, whereas men were engaged in more specialized, advanced skills on-site. However, in some places the close collaboration of men and women did exist, and especially in family mode embroidery workshops. In Guangzhou’s embroidery centers, along with male dominated workshops, family business coexisted. A Guangzhou embroiderer recounted that his family workshop was inherited from a great grand father and that every member of the family was involved in embroidery production. Thirteen people of three generations lived in a house with room for ten embroidery frames. The work mode was flexible: sometimes everyone worked on their own piece and sometimes more than one person on the same piece.²⁶⁹

Conclusion

A prosperous embroidery industry in China’s nineteenth century was supported by highly specialized workers who either directly worked for embroidery workshops or supplied the materials. Men and women were both involved in this commercial network. In *Technology and*

²⁶⁸ The original text reads “迨至清乾隆間，顧繡半多男工為之，不僅女也，” in Xu Weinan, *Gu xiu kao* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1936), 4.

²⁶⁹ Huang Yan, “Zuihou de ‘hualao’: Guang xiu daibiaoxing chuanchengren Xu Chiguang fangtanlu.” *Wenhua yichan* 2017, 3: 132.

Gender, Francesca Bray reveals how female weavers were forced out of the market by male weavers and eventually had to take the role of spinning. Likewise, this chapter has explored labor division in embroidery. With the growth of the commercialized textile industry, the history of embroidery in late imperial China witnessed increasingly marginalized female labor from more important to less skilled and less respected work.²⁷⁰ Poor girls first replaced wealthy ladies to make clothes and accessories. The consequence was that women took on the rote job of stitching in a collaborative work, leaving underdrawing to male professionals. In regions like Guangdong where both men and women embroidered, male workers were privileged by collective, onsite, and high-paid jobs whereas women conducted seasonal work at home. Moreover, men took important roles in the business such as managers, negotiators, and middlemen who dispatched piece works. This gender imbalance, however, was not permanent. Significant changes in the early twentieth century will be discussed in the next chapter.

²⁷⁰ The marginalization of women in embroidery industry of late Qing is also pointed out by Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century*, 80.

Chapter Four

“Embroidery is One Type of Fine Arts”: The Making of Art and Artists

Embroidery that Mimics Reality

Cixiu caojian wohu tu 刺繡草間臥虎圖 (Embroidered Reclining Tiger in the Grass,

hereafter *Reclining Tiger*, figure 4.1) is an artwork created by Shen Li 沈立, one of the Shen sisters who represented the modernization of embroidery in late Qing and Republican China.²⁷¹ This work of Shen Li epitomizes the *fangzhen xiu* 仿真繡 (lifelike embroidery) approach that was created by her sister Shen Shou, utilizing innovated stitches such as *bi zhen* 剔針, *xuan zhen* 旋針, *shi zhen* 施針 and *xushi zhen* 虛實針 to mimic reality.²⁷² *Reclining Tiger* vividly depicts a scene in the natural world. An assortment of stitches and threads characterize different textures of the tiger’s fur at the belly, neck, and tail, and a breeze appears to blow through slanting grass. The realistic approach of this artwork would have astonished any pre-twentieth century embroiderer who had never depicted objects as a three-dimensional entity.

²⁷¹ Biographies of Shen Li and Shen Shou are available in the introduction of Shen Shou, Zhang Jian ed., Wang Yijun annotated and translated, *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo* (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2004), 31, 35.

²⁷² *Bi zhen* (one stitch pushes the previous one according to the dialect in lower Yangtze region) is a row of consecutive short stitches with hiding the pinhole underneath the thread of the previous stitch. *Xuan zhen* (literally swirling stitch) inherits the Su embroidery tradition aligning consecutive short stitches. Instead of arranging all stitches to the same direction, a curved line is created in the invention of lifelike embroidery. In Shen’s work, *xuan zhen* consists of rows of *bizhen* to depict the natural shape of the animal body. *Shi zhen* (literally stitches to be applied) and *Xushi zhen* (literally loose and firm stitches), on the other hand, both indicate strategies. While *shi zhen* applies one layer of stitches over another loose, thin layer, *Xushi zhen* requires to stitch sparsely or densely for different visual effects. In Shen’s time, a light touch of strokes was not a novel concept in the representations of Chinese painting and calligraphy, but an extraordinary traditional embroiderer must be always stitching densely with fine threads. For detailed explanation of these stitches used in lifelike embroidery, see Shen Shou, *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo*, 86-96.



Figure 4.1 Shen Li, *Cixiu caojian wohu tu* 刺繡草間臥虎圖 (Embroidered Reclining Tiger in the Grass).
Source: <https://www.shanghaimuseum.net/mu/frontend/pg/article/id/CI00027836>



Figure 4.2 Shen Li, *Cixiu caojian wohu tu* 刺繡草間臥虎圖 (Embroidered Reclining Tiger in the Grass),
partial. Source: <https://www.shanghaimuseum.net/mu/frontend/pg/article/id/CI00027836>

In Shen Li's work, several types of creative stitches are applied to depict real objects. While coarse hair on the tiger's forehead and back is depicted by twisted threads, the shimmering silk floss represents the fluffiness and softness of the tiger's face and paws. The combination of *bi zhen* and *xuan zhen* forms irregular curved lines to delineate an arched belly. To sculpt a fluffy, raised tail, *shi zhen* and *xushi zhen* are employed with silk threads fine or thick, and sparse or dense to imitate the shape and texture of a real body part. In addition to these stitch combinations, the contrast of light and shadow frames the thread relations to create the "fangzhen" visual effect – embroidery that mimics reality (figure 4.2).

The polychrome threads applied in this work were an impressive achievement thanks to the technical availability of synthetic dyes. Natural dyes traditionally used to colour silk threads in Chinese embroidery were limited to a narrow range of basic hues – such as red, yellow, blue, and green. For this reason, traditional embroidery patterns were coloured in a fixed palette. The artist of this work, Shen Li, in contrast, used floss in similar tones to twist a single thread to achieve the subtleness of colour gradation. This could not have been achieved without countless experiments in silk dyeing by Shen Li herself using newly imported synthetic dyes – this was an extremely time-consuming process that could not be replicated by dyeing workshops. Inventing colours was an essential part of the artistic creation that made Shen Li a true innovator.

Shen Li's embroidery was made possible by the embroidery reform that occurred in the first three decades of twentieth-century China. When heavily embellished clothes, accessories, and furnishings fell out of fashion, Chinese embroidery called for an urgent change to survive. As a result, embroidery education was launched synthesizing traditional techniques with newly updated knowledge from the outside world, building an era with the involvement of innovators and students recreating embroidery and embroiderers. In my study, Republican embroidery

reform raises the question of what constituted technical excellence in the age of transition. In Alfred Gell's explanation, the technical excellence of an art object relies on the technical difficulty – a process that “transcends” common “understanding”, and thus appears “magical”.²⁷³ If, as discussed in the previous two chapters, boudoir embroiderers achieved this magic through their fine stitches, and if commercial embroidery achieved this magic through collaborative work, then what was the magical formula that Republican embroidery reformers utilized to awe their audience? During the early twentieth century new ideas entered China, contributing to what Leo Ou-fan Lee calls a “rupture with the past” that was in contrast to a “glorious future.”²⁷⁴ Lee points out that this period was constantly refreshed by a series of new things: “new policies” (新政 *xinzheng*), “new schools” (新學 *xinxue*), and the famous New Cultural Movement that signified Chinese enlightenment.²⁷⁵ The embroidery reform discussed in this chapter started at an in-between point after the experiment of several new policies but before the cultural storms came in the late 1910s. It will thus be illuminating to consider the roles of newly imported knowledge in constructing the technical excellence of Republican embroiderers who were ahead of their time.

Current scholarship on the modern Chinese textile history is largely focused on the effects of mechanized production and imported fabrics.²⁷⁶ Embroidery, as the traditional presentation of fabric making, has received little consideration as a potential means to study

²⁷³ Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*, edited by J. Coote and A. Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 49.

²⁷⁴ Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Shanghai Modern: Reflections on Urban Culture in China in the 1930s,” in *Alternative Modernities*, edited by Dilip Gaonkar (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), 111.

²⁷⁵ Lee, “Shanghai Modern,” 112.

²⁷⁶ For example, see the discussion in Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 106-110 and Mei Mei Rado, “When Modernity and Nationalism Intersect: Textiles for Dress in Republican China.” *INHA Perspective* 2016, no. 1: 180-187.

modernity in China. Dorothy Ko's case study of Shen Shou is the exception.²⁷⁷ Following Ko, this chapter expands upon embroidery reform in Republican China, viewing this movement as a redistribution of resources and knowledge in the new age. I argue that the technical virtuosity of Chinese embroidery represented a sharp break with the past, transforming from collaborative crafting to independent artist creation. To make it happen, women embroiderers took the Enlightenment way of apprehending and applying scientific knowledge to have mastered phases of art creation from underdrawing to fabric dying and stitching. Not only did women refuse to be isolated, silent boudoir embroiderers, but they stopped playing insignificant roles in collaborative craftsmanship. They were involved in a self-promotion movement to a broad audience with the support of modern infrastructures such as school education, frequent exhibitions, and a prosperous media industry.

How to Survive a Crisis?

In the mid-nineteenth century, a Qing official Liang Zhangju 梁章鉅 described two worrisome phenomena of his time – on the one hand, crafts that once defined luxury, such as embroidery on clothes and engraving on architecture, had become mundane. On the other hand, various foreign goods emerged as the new favorites steering the market.²⁷⁸ Liang's reflection reveals commercialization in the late Qing that generalized former lavishness. As someone who witnessed the dramatic decline of the empire from Qianlong (1736-95) to Daoguang (1820-50), Liang was perhaps criticizing the superfluousness contributed by both domestic and imported

²⁷⁷ Dorothy Ko, "Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace: Shen Shou, Embroidery and Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," in *Looking Modern: East Asian Visual Culture from Treaty Ports to World War II*, edited by Jennifer Purtle and Hans B. Thomsen (Chicago: Center for the Arts of East Asia, University of Chicago, co-published by Art Media Resources, 2009), 38-61.

²⁷⁸ Liang Zhangju, *Tui'an suibi* Vol. 7, 163, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu*, in the database Diaolou.

merchandise. However, what he did not foresee were the ways in which this merchandise would be implicated in social upheaval decades after his death. In 1893, Zheng Guanying 鄭觀應, the late Qing reformist published his essay collection *Shengshi weiyan* 盛世危言, in which he alerted contemporaries to the danger of imported goods: “today, competition of tea is from India, Sri Lanka, and Japan; silk is impacted by Italy, France, and Japan. Is (Chinese products’) collapse coming immediately?”²⁷⁹ In Zheng’s time, foreign products were flooding the Chinese market, and their novelty and competitive price were rendering Chinese luxury goods unfashionable.

It was in this context that Chinese embroidery experienced a dramatic turn. As discussed in Chapter Three, embroidery in the nineteenth century was a business that involved the participation of workshop owners, middlemen, professional painters, and both male and female embroiderers, weaving a craft network supported by specialized workers. Workshop owners hired professional painters, who created trending designs to be dispatched to hired men or seasonal female workers via middlemen. The collaboration of all parties contributed to a fast production line that enabled embroidery to become a ubiquitous decoration that “is needed by every single person as it embellished every piece of fabric.”²⁸⁰

However, Zheng’s concern was soon realized – the popularity of embroidery confronted a downturn in the early twentieth century when foreign textile and design was imported to China. The ubiquity of mass-produced embroidered garments gave way to suits in plain colours for men

²⁷⁹ “況今日茶有印度、錫蘭、日本之爭，絲有意大利、法蘭西、東洋之抵，衰竭可立待乎？” Zheng Guanying, *Shengshi weiyan* (Huhehaote: Neimenggu renmin chubanshe, 2005), 182.

²⁸⁰ The original text is “无一人不需，繡無一處不用。” See Sheng Guocheng, “Wanjiu Zhongguo cixiuye chuyi,” *Nanyang shangwu bao* No. 54 (1908): 1.

and neat jackets and skirts for women.²⁸¹ As the modern style disfavored colourful, meticulously decorated outfits, embroidery no longer embellished every piece of clothing. Heavily embroidered furnishing and decorations for ceremonies and religious use also went into decline. This was a transformation pressured by advanced civilizations, as critics viewed China's old fashion and style as the opposite of modernity. Although the new standard did not replace the old at once, a declining embroidery market was evident in port cities, and continued to permeate inland areas.²⁸²

Intellectuals quickly viewed Chinese embroidery as a signal of backwardness. Although embroidery in the nineteenth century was mostly a self-sufficient domestic industry, the sudden decline at the turn of the twentieth century urged intellectuals to revisit Chinese textile's export business and define foreign trade as the parameter for success.²⁸³ This shift was motivated by the universal colonial practice of benefiting from lucrative overseas trade, and more importantly, signified China's subjugation to Western-accepted standards, such as modernity. Intellectuals lamented that Chinese embroidery changed from "reputable (merchandise) that exported abroad" to "suffering a sudden, devastating decline, and placed among the ones to be naturally eliminated."²⁸⁴ On the other hand, they envisioned Chinese embroidery to potentially "recover from the devastation and to be sold and popular overseas."²⁸⁵ Many further commented that

²⁸¹ Antonia Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear? A National Problem," in *Dress, Sex and Text in Chinese Culture*, edited by Antonia Finnane and Anne McLaren (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1999), 9-11.

²⁸² For example, a discussion on Suzhou silk producers' struggle under the impact of modern clothes can be found in Peter Carroll, "Refashioning Suzhou: Dress, Commodification, and Modernity," in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 2003, 11 (2): 443-78.

²⁸³ During the Qing times before its door was forced to open by Western powers, Guangdong province functioned as the sole exporting port the traded textiles overseas. The foreign business constituted a small portion of textile trade with domestic business taking the major portion. See discussion about Guangdong embroidery in Chapter Three.

²⁸⁴ The original text is "赫赫有名, 銷售于外洋" and "一落千丈, 處於天然淘汰之列." See Sheng Guocheng, "Wanjiu zhongguo cixiuye chuyi," 1, "Duiyu cixiu zhi yijian," *Nü xuesheng* No. 14 (1909): 3 and "Shiyong cixiu shu." *Guangdong quanyue bao* No. 108 (1910): 23.

²⁸⁵ The original text is "挽回頹業, 銷流外洋." See Sheng Guocheng, "Wanjiu zhongguo cixiuye chuyi," 1 and "Duiyu cixiu zhi yijian," 3. Similar opinion proliferated early twentieth century periodicals.

because embroidery was a traditional handiwork, it was among the most promising sectors leading to a shortcut to success as China was still incompetent in modern industries. They argued that once revived, embroidery was very likely to bring trade surpluses. As official and reformer Ma Jianzhong 馬建忠 proposed that: “(we should) refine Chinese traditional goods and make them popular,”²⁸⁶ the intellectuals recalled the Western craze for Chinese silk and anticipated patronage from Western markets. However, the shortcoming of the Chinese embroidery industry was evident in the production of furnishing, clothing, and accessories that were useless outside Chinese culture. In other words, China had no embroidery genre that catered to Western taste. The revival of China’s textile supremacy called for a new type of technical excellence to suit the times and became a mission strongly associated with national sufficiency and ethnic pride.

Who should take the responsibility for the reform is a question worth pondering. Even though late nineteenth-century embroidery in many sericulture centers was a business led by men, embroidery reform became a female responsibility. Encouraging women’s contribution to family and society economically and morally was never a novel practice in the Qing dynasty. Denoted as “*nü gong*” 女紅 – women’s textile work, in particular, constituted a moral and economic contribution preventing women from idleness. In the early twentieth century, women again were encouraged to contribute, and in the new context they were asked to take more responsibility: embroidering for national revival. As reformer Liang Qichao 梁啟超 put it, women’s participation would double the labor force and increase domestic production.²⁸⁷

Embroidery, the needlework traditionally with women’s involvement, was an easy target to be

²⁸⁶ The original text is “精求中國固有之貨，令其暢銷也。” See Feng Guifen and Ma Jianzhong, *Cai xixue yi: Feng Guifen Ma Jianzhong ji*, annotated by Zheng Dahua (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1994), 126.

Westerner’s interest was focusing on collecting antiques unable to rescue the entire embroidery industry from brink.
²⁸⁷ Liang Qichao, “Lun nüxue,” *Shiwu bao*, April 12, 1897.

labeled as gendered work. In 1906, the Qing court established the Bureau of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce 農工商部 for institutional modernization. To implement the reform, the Bureau founded the Department of Embroidery 繡工科 in the same year to “promote women’s textile work,”²⁸⁸ exclusively recruiting female students.²⁸⁹

In launching the reform, China looked to its neighbor Japan for experience. As a successfully modernized new power, Japan actively invented new textiles to showcase its newly gained technological and cultural advancements. With designers going abroad to acquire knowledge and inspiration, Japanese textile companies catered to the American and European high-end luxury market. Japan invented the term *bijustu* “fine art” to categorize their Western-inspired art creation, signifying a break from the past.²⁹⁰ Whether imitating oil painting or creating hybrid Chinese-Japanese patterns, the reinvented Japanese embroidery succeeded in applying three-dimensional perspective and visual realism to the images, which appealed to the aesthetics of Western connoisseurs.²⁹¹

The ability of Japan to synthesize Eastern techniques and Western taste astounded many Chinese, and, with more frequent communication, China began to decipher the secret to Japan’s

²⁸⁸ “提倡女紅,” in “Shiye: Gesheng gongyi huizhi.” *Dongfang zazhi* Vol.3, No. 10, October 1906: 194.

²⁸⁹ Taiwanese scholar Wu Fangzheng notices gender construction in this move. See discussion in Wu Fangzheng, “Nüxing yu bolanhui: Yi 1907 nian liangchang zhanlan weili,” *Jindai zhongguo funüshi yanjiu* 2015, 26: 21-23. How this gender construction started awaits further research; The recruitment of female students in *xiugongke* was likely influenced by the tradition of boudoir embroidery tradition and the fact that embroidery was already offered in many female schools.

²⁹⁰ The category of *bijustu* was discussed by both Dorothy Ko and Mei Mei Rado. According to Ko, *bijustu* included painting, sculpture, and art-as-industry. Rado argues that *bijustu* functioned as a useful label for Japanese export art entering Western market. See Ko, “Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace,” 46 and Mei Mei Rado, “The Hybrid Orient: Japonisme and Nationalism of the Takashimaya Mandarin Robes,” *Fashion Theory* 2015, 19:5, 605.

²⁹¹ Other than embroidery, Japan also invented high-end woven fabrics that entered international market. For the establishment of Japan’s image as an artistic country at international expositions, see Carol Ann Christ, “‘The Sole Guardians of the Art Inheritance of Asia’: Japan and China at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 2000, 8 (3): 675–709. For textile advancement in particular, see Rado, “The Hybrid Orient,” 583-616. For an example of Japanese embroidery mimicking oil painting, see <https://www.khalilicollections.org/collections/japanese-art-of-the-meiji-period/khalili-collections-japanese-art-of-the-meiji-period-panel-misc5/>

accomplishment.²⁹² A discussion criticizing Chinese embroidery among intellectuals gradually began a few years before the dynastic fall, mostly built on knowledge gained from Japan.²⁹³ For intellectuals, Japanese embroidery represented a modern form of art that depicted objects so naturally and scientifically in outline, composition, and colouring. In comparison with Japanese advancements, intellectuals elaborated on several key drawbacks of Chinese embroidery. Firstly, Chinese embroiderers were hindered by their inability to draw, which often resulted in an antiquated outcome as the embroiderer rigidly followed pattern books. Furthermore, the insensitivity to colours contributed to the unnatural quality of embroidered objects. And lastly, ineffective presentation of light and shadows was believed to impair the overall visual effect (figure 4.3).²⁹⁴ In a word, Chinese embroidery was unfashionable and unenlightened.



Figure 4.3 Rank badge for a fourth rank military official embroidered in the traditional style. Source:

<https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/373255>

²⁹² The last few years of the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed groups frequently sent to Japan with knowledge, books, and objects brought back. In 1907, four Chinese female students went to Japan to study embroidery that was taught in female schools. See “Yanjiu cixiu zhi xiansheng.” *Datong bao* Vol. 7, No. 13 (1907): 25. The famous embroidery reformer Shen Shou visited Japan in 1905. See Shen Shou, *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo*, 147.

²⁹³ It seems that China’s attempt to decipher the secret of Japanese embroidery occurred at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century with various editors joining in the discussion, probably benefitted from recent frequently communication between the two countries, including the above-mentioned visits. For example, “Shiyong cixiu shu.” *Guangdong quanye bao* No. 108 (1910): 23-25. A few years earlier, when Yang Zhixun wrote for an official print media, he was still baffled by the popularity of Japanese embroidery in the Europe. See Yang Zhixun, “Ouzhou xiaoyong xiujian zhi qingxing: ju Riben gongshang huibao suozei,” *Shangwu guanbao* 1907, (03): 26-27.

²⁹⁴ Sheng Guocheng, “Wanjiu zhongguo cixiuye chuyi,” 1-3, “Shiyong cixiu shu,” 23, and “Duiyu cixiu zhi yijian,”

The discussion culminated with practical advice for Chinese embroidery to please the Western-oriented market. Embroiderers were urged to develop painting principles, and especially pencil sketch and watercolour knowledge to underdraw and stitch for a harmonious representation of colours, light, and shadows; they were advised to create decorative pictures instead of clothing items accepted by a high-end market outside Chinese culture. Essentially, the consensus that “painting is the basis for embroidery” pointed to a shift from collaborative craftsmanship to individual artistic creation.²⁹⁵ Female embroiderers were asked to keep the secret of technical excellence to themselves so that the beholder would stand in an awe of the artwork; they would not follow ready-made patterns but to control the entire process as a capable artist to win foreign customers.

New Schools, New Skills

Several factors determined the replacement of workshop artisans with school-educated embroiderers to be the principal force of the embroidery modernizing movement. School education, first of all, was the most advanced means of knowledge offering for its effectiveness and productivity in which the traditional mother-daughter mode failed to provide. Especially when an imported, new type of knowledge is offered, only qualified teachers at school were capable of teaching all levels of knowledge to equip a modern embroiderer. And lastly, it was through school education that all-round, competent women with knowledge and skills were to fit a modernized nation – the process of modernizing embroidery was also a process modernizing women.

²⁹⁵ The original text is “繪畫為刺繡之根本。” See “Shiyong cixiu shu,” 24.

The incorporating of textile making skills into school education was commenced by missionaries who added textile skills into the curriculum of female schools that they founded in China in the mid-nineteenth century. Thanks to the training gained at missionary schools, pauper children were equipped with the ability to perform domestic jobs and earn income. Not surprisingly, this strategy of promoting women's economic contribution from the inner chamber coincided with Chinese traditional values and was acknowledged by intellectuals. The late Qing reformist Chen Chi 陳熾 in 1896 observed that: "in the Western tradition, school is available for female embroidery, work, and art.... After their marriage, women all can assist husbands and children."²⁹⁶ In addition to simply being good wives and wise mothers, Chen found considerable human resource value in women: "as putting families in order helps to rule the country, this is the foundational strategy to a rich country and strong army."²⁹⁷ As he further commented that: "among four-hundred millions of Chinese populations, women are about half. Other than living peacefully and eating well, (they) care about nothing else,"²⁹⁸ in Chen's eyes school education was the means to cultivate the great number of non-elite women. This statement was echoed by domestic non-missionary educators who promoted female education offering textile skills. By 1907 when the central government issued charters to regulate female education, there were already more than four hundred female schools existing across the country with many teaching textile techniques.²⁹⁹ Soon after this announcement, the Qing government took action to

²⁹⁶ The original text is: "泰西風俗，凡女子紡繡、工作、藝術，皆有女塾。" See Chen Chi, "Fu xue," in Zhu Youhuan ed., *Zhongguo jindai xuezhi shiliao, diyiji xiace* (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1986), 868.

²⁹⁷ The original text is: "故女子既嫁之後，皆能相夫佐子，以治國而齊家，是富國強兵之本計業。" Chen Chi, "Fu xue," 868.

²⁹⁸ The original text is: "中國四萬萬人，婦女約居其半，安居飽食，無所用心。" Chen Chi, "Fu xue," 868.

²⁹⁹ There is substantial research on the topic of early female education in modern China. For examples, see Weikun Cheng, "Going Public Through Education: Female Reformers and Girls' Schools in Late Qing Beijing," in *Late Imperial China* 2000, 21 (1): 107–44 and Paul J. Bailey, *Gender and Education in China: Gender Discourses and Women's Schooling in the Early Twentieth Century*. Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2007. For research on

experiment on its own female education.³⁰⁰ Yet the dynasty did not last long enough to significantly advance female education.

The real legacy of the Qing embroidery reform was the advanced technical level, realized by forerunner Shen Shou 沈壽. Shen was born into an intellectual family in Suzhou, where embroidering practice long existed as a tradition for local girls. Married to a member of the elite who would paint to facilitate her embroidery, Shen had been a skilled embroiderer of the boudoir category before her rise to fame. Her breakthrough came in 1904 when she presented an embroidered birthday gift to Empress Dowager Cixi, who awarded Shen a visit to Japan to seek solutions for modernizing embroidery. Inspired by Japanese pictorial embroidery, Shen started her experiment in reforming Suzhou embroidery.³⁰¹ She dyed her own threads to create a sophisticated palette able to capture the subtleness of colour representation and invented several types of stitches – for example, *xuan zhen* 旋針, to depict skin texture. Between 1909 and 1919 Shen created several embroideries utilizing the techniques that she had invented, and vividly reproduced portraits of Western icons such as the Queen of Italy and Jesus to gain international attention (figure 4.4).³⁰² These works were sent to expositions overseas, capturing high-level

female schools that offered embroidery founded by various parties, see Liu Pujuan, “Qingmo minchu nüzi xuexiao meishu jiaoyu yanjiu.” (Master’s thesis, Zhejiang Normal University, 2013), 12-18.

³⁰⁰ One example is Baqi Nü Gong Chuanxi Suo 八旗女紅傳習所 (Women’s Work Education Center of the Eight Banners, referred to as Education Center) founded in Shenyang in 1919 to encourage female economic independence by offering them practical skills possibly to resolve partial of the livelihood problem of the banners. For primary source on this school, see *Minguo Shenyangxian zhi* Vol. 1 (1917), 89, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. For scholarly studies, see Zhang Hong, “Qingmo fengtian baqi nügong chuanxi suo xingban shimo jiqi pingjia,” *Manzu yanjiu* No. 2 (1996): 36-39 and Bai Zhongyang, “Qingmo minchu nügong chuanxi suo tanxi.” *Tianjin daxue xuebao* Vol. 20, No. 5 (2018): 439-445.

³⁰¹ Although Shen was directly influenced by embroidery created by Japanese, pictorial embroidery that imitated paintings was practiced by European and American female embroiderers in the late eighteenth century, most famously represented by the British artist Mary Linwood. There is a substantial study on this subject, see for example Heidi A. Strobel, “Women’s Embroidered Self-portraiture in the Late 18th Century: Authorship, Agency, and Artistry,” *Literature Compass* 2021, 18 (5). However, the relationship between pictorial embroidery in the West and Japan awaits further research.

³⁰² “Queen of Italy: Portrait in Silk by Chinese Lady.” *South China Morning Post*, July 21, 1910.

international awards and forming a new embroidery genre “*fangzhen xiu*”.³⁰³ Before her death in 1921, Shen worked at an educator at several schools teaching her innovated embroidery techniques.³⁰⁴



Figure 4.4 Left: Shen Shou, “Queen of Italy,” in Liu Fan, *Lun Shen Shou dui Zhongguo cixiu yishu de gongxian*, 27. Right: Shen Shou, “Portrait of Jesus,” in Liu Fan, *Lun Shen Shou dui Zhongguo cixiu yishu de gongxian*, 31.

The basis of Shen’s embroidery philosophy was *fangzhen*, an approach directly inspired by the realistic visual effect found in Japanese embroidery. In her memoir *Xuehuan xiupu* 雪宦繡譜, she emphasized the importance of the composition of the artwork, the colour combination, and the light effect. She lamented the lack of awareness of light effect in Chinese art: “(the visual presentation of) *yin* and *yang* are only displayed in photography, pencil paintings, and oil paintings,” and she insisted that “embroiderers must understand this principle.”³⁰⁵ Shen did not

³⁰³ Shen’s contemporary did not grant her embroidery a unified name – 像真派 was one example. Modern Chinese academia usually names Shen’s style *fangzhenxiu* – embroidery that mimics reality. The English translation “lifelike embroidery” is taken from Ko, “Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace,” 38. The relationship between media notice of Japanese pictorial embroidery and Shen Shou’s Japan tour awaits further study.

³⁰⁴ For an English article discussing Shen Shou’s embroidery modernization and educational contribution, see Ko, “Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace,” 38-61. For Chinese language studies, see Lin Shuyu, “Shen Shou dui Zhongguo cixiu jiaoyu de gongxian” (Master’s thesis, Fujian Normal University), 2013 and Liu Fan, “Lun Shen Shou dui Zhongguo cixiu yishu de gongxian” (Master’s thesis, Southeast University), 2006.

³⁰⁵ “畫之分陰陽，唯鏡攝、鉛畫、油畫則然...繡則不可不兼明此理，” in Shen Shou, *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo*, 118.

follow a specific genre of visual arts for her underdrawing but proposed a mix of techniques used in all visual arts including photography and painting. More importantly, she believed that the utilization of colours and stitches was without fixed techniques.³⁰⁶ She encouraged embroiderers to take an active role to employ painting principles to their works to achieve a realistic visual effect, no matter what underdrawings they were based on.

Shen Shou's modern approach to embroidery was supported by a natural way of depicting objects and the advancement in chemical dyes – this societal progress benefitted from science. This concept allied with China's fine art reform, which occurred under that call for science led by the New Cultural Movement much later.³⁰⁷ Shen Shou was experimenting on scientific approaches to art much ahead of her time, which proposed a higher level of artistic cultivation required for her followers – even higher than that for Japanese embroiderers who trusted professional painters.³⁰⁸ A few years later, after Shen passed away, another embroidery reformer Hua Qi 華琪 emphasized the crucial pre-stitching process of choosing a realistic underdrawing for the artwork and, more importantly, detailed how to create one's own underdrawing.³⁰⁹ Throughout Republican China, the specific underdrawing that an embroidery was based on is difficult to deduce. Embroiderers and commentators seldom mentioned the source of any specific embroidery or acknowledged the original artist. This absence strongly suggests that embroiderers were often ignorant of the source of their underdrawings. Shen Shou had to rely on her husband to pull personal strings to acquire the typographic print of the Italian

³⁰⁶ Shen Shou, *Xuehuan xiupu tushuo*, 127.

³⁰⁷ The effort to reform embroidery as well as other craftworks began before the fall of Qing. See Wu Xiaoyuan, “Wanqing minguo chuantong gongyi fazhan celue yanjiu: jiyu jishu yu shehui zhuanxing yujing de kaocha” (PhD diss., Shanxi University, 2019), 69-80. The reform to Chinese paintings, on the other hand, according to Chinese art historian Zheng Gong, occurred much later in the late 1910s. See Zheng Gong, “Qimeng yu zijue: Zailun Zhongguo meishu xiandaixing de jiangou,” in *2020 Zhongguo meishu pipingjia niandu piping wenji*, edited by Ji Shaofeng (Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2020), 189-192.

³⁰⁸ Rado, “The Hybrid Orient,” 593-94.

³⁰⁹ Zhang Hua Qi, Li Xu Pinyun, *Nüzi cixiu jiaokeshu* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1926), 21-30.

queen and a copy of an oil portrait of Jesus;³¹⁰ Hua Qi advised that any images suitable for underdrawing should be kept safe and intact.³¹¹ Because of the lack of underdrawing, Republican embroiderers perhaps imitated foreign artworks without understanding the contexts, which forced them to be resourceful and creative.

During Republican China embroidery education cultivated female students, under the new government's promotion of traditional sectors such as textile, tea, and ceramics as foundational industries of the nation and following policies encouraging handicraft schools and attendance at international expositions.³¹² Consequently, female schools incorporated embroidery into the curriculum, gaining popularity in port cities as well as remote inland areas.³¹³ Embroidery was offered by a wide range of female schools from vocational to elementary and secondary. One shared agenda among those schools was to develop well-rounded women armed with sophisticated handiwork skills.³¹⁴ A curriculum for the embroidery program from a Hunan female school reveals that for a full-time two-year embroidery program, an average of twenty-four weekly hours were spent on embroidery courses while other time was devoted to foundation courses such as maths, physical education, and music.³¹⁵ The 1910s and 1920s witnessed a boom in embroidery education with more schools established, more short- and long- term programs

³¹⁰ Shen Shou's embroidery of Jesus was based on the seventeenth century Italian artist Guido Reni's oil painting. The sources of Shen's two works were discussed in Ko, "Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace," 39, 49.

³¹¹ Zhang Hua Qi, *Nüzi cixiu jiaokeshu*, 30.

³¹² Wu Xiaoyuan, "Wanqing minguo chuantong gongyi fazhan celue yanjiu: Jiyu jishu yu shehui zhuanxing yujing de kaocha" (PhD diss., Shanxi University, 2019), 86-92.

³¹³ Anhui *Nüzi cansang jiangxi suo* 女子蠶桑講習所 offered embroidery program to women. See *Minguo Anhui tongzhi gao* (1934), 2732, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. In Yunnan, *Nüzi zhiye xuetang* 女子職業學堂 was founded in 1909 and offered embroidery program. See *Minguo xinzhuan Yunnan tongzhi* Vol. 137 (1949), 10376, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

³¹⁴ According to 1907 rules issued by Qing court, *nügong* was among one of nine designated courses offered in higher elementary female schools. "Xuebu zouding nüzi xiaoxuetang zhangcheng (1907)," in Shu Xicheng ed, *Zhongguo jindai jiaoyushi ziliao* Vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981), 796.

³¹⁵ "Chuji zhiye cixiuke kecheng dagang," in *Hunan Pingjiang sili qiming nüxuetiao sanshi zhounian jiniance*. 1937, 82-83.

launched, more teachers and students recruited, and more facilities built. By the early 1930s, embroidery training was well established in female schools throughout China.³¹⁶

These newly founded schools and programs were deeply influenced by the model that Shen Shou had set up for her followers. Textbooks, curriculums, local educational bureaus, and print media editors all proposed high standards for student embroiderers. To become a qualified embroiderer, firstly, painting skills were to be learned.³¹⁷ Good students must “know about bright and dark (of the light)” and “understand painting principles”.³¹⁸ Moreover, to achieve a realistic visual effect, threads had to be prepared in a pallet of gradually changed colours to mimic a colourful real world. Embroiderers were thus expected to comprehend the dying skills themselves to create threads with desirable colours.³¹⁹ As for stitching, a wide range of old and new techniques were offered selectively at different schools. Like Shen Shou who created innovative stitches based on traditional Suzhou stitches, a top-tier student in Republican China was able to “bring forth the new through the old”.³²⁰

It is thus reasonable to ask if the above-described educational requirements were fully implemented, and if qualified students were fostered through such means. Sometimes positive models were presented in Republican media. For example, one issue of 1922 *Simin bao* 四民報 released the news of Zheng Xinruo 鄭心若 that this top-tier student to the embroiderer master Hua Qi founded her own school after graduation.³²¹ Equally celebrated were graduated

³¹⁶ 1932 *Xinwen bao* commented that “now (embroidery) education has gradually prevailed 今則教育以漸普及.” See “Cixiu zhi mei,” *Xinwen bao*, January 10, 1932.

³¹⁷ Example see “Chuji zhiye cixiuke kecheng dagang,” 82-83.

³¹⁸ “知明暗” in “Cixiu lei kaoyu,” *Jiaoyu yu zhiye* No. 34 (1922): 42-43. “通画理” in “Zhanlanhui zhong zhi cixiu pingyi,” *Xinwen bao*, April 16, 1918.

³¹⁹ For dying methods introduced to embroiderers, see, for example, Zhang Hua Qi, *Nüzi cixiu jiaokeshu*, 16-19.

³²⁰ “推陈出新” in “Cixiu lei kaoyu,” *Jiaoyu yu zhiye* No. 34 (1922): 42-43. Similar criteria see “Cixiu lei kaoyu,” *Jiaoyu yu zhiye* No. 34 (1922): 42-43 and “Ben yixian jiaoyu chengji zhanlanhui nü shifan gaoxiao xiao cixiuke baogaobiao,” *Nanhui xian jiaoyuhui yuekan* No. 19 (1918): 8-11.

³²¹ “Gailiang cixiu zhi xiansheng,” *Simin bao*, January 8, 1922.

embroiderers who secured teaching positions through which they were able to cultivate more women.³²² This reality, unfortunately, only yielded a limited image of the graduates and their replacement. The ideal placement of an embroidery would be submitting it to international and national expositions as modeled by Shen Shou. Though this achievement brought both singular honor and handsome reward, perhaps only the outstanding few achieved this feat.³²³ It must be noted, however, that newspapers only promoted successful individuals, and little is known about average or underachieving students, especially those who graduated from short-term intensive courses.³²⁴ An average student would have to seek other means to survive. Embroidery workshops for international or domestic market, commission works, and piecework jobs might have constituted a viable channel for embroiderers to at least compensate living costs after graduation.³²⁵

The Making of Artists

The female embroidery education movement in the early twentieth century was a process of quickly training many artists. In the pre-formal education era, the embroidery industry in many sericultural centers was supported by girls and women who embroidered at home, accepting assigned piecework from workshops and rigidly following patterns created by professional painters. The relationship between technician and audience was indirect and

³²² For example, *Xiangyan zazhi* described that Ms. Liang as a teacher was graduated where she taught, which was an honor of the graduated students. “Cixiu nüxiao xiuye geijiang,” *Xiangyan zazhi* No. 11 (1915):10.

³²³ A female school in Hangzhou stated that the school was proud of its achievement in submitting students’ works to major exhibitions without selling them on the market, which distinguished the school from others. See “Cixiu ye: Hangzhoushi sili nüzi chuji zhiye xuexiao cixiuke yalue,” *Shizheng yuekan* Vol. 5, No. 5 (1932): 6-7.

³²⁴ The adding of crush course and expansion of schools was briefly mentioned in some news articles. For examples, see “Cixiu ke kuochong fanwei,” *Xinwen bao*, March 10, 1916 and “Zhenxiu nüxue zhi xin sheshi,” *Wuxi xinbao*, February 23, 1923.

³²⁵ In Li Bin’s article on the image of Republican female embroiderers, she discusses the contrary of newspaper representation and reality regarding the image of female embroiderers – while media encouraged female independency via embroidery, the embroidery workshops continued with traditional mode and male dominance. See Li Bin, “Shehui xingbie yu baokan zhong jiangou de cixiu yinxiang: Yi 1920-1925 nian *Shenbao* weili,” *Journal of Shanxi Normal University (Social Science Edition)* 2010 Vol.37 No.4: 126-129.

concealed – the buyer and the embroiderer did not know each other, and, moreover, the technical virtuosity of the embroiderer was subject to the creation of the painter with less control of embroiderers. In contrast, the reform was driven by a market that was established for commodified art. It was a new environment in which women artists were granted the agency to fully control the technical virtuosity of embroidery.

It is in this context that embroidery students claimed to be active artists. They were seemingly aware of their full control of the art creation process with gained skills in painting, dying, and stitching and openly remarked that “embroidery is one type of fine arts”.³²⁶ Yet, unlike anonymous female artisans who earned piecework wages, new-born artists relied on a different means of livelihood – they gained fame and monetary reward through active publicity, mainly exhibitions and media reports. This publicity was an inseparable part of the creation of embroidery that was defined to be modern to encourage individual participation in a larger, all-connected world. Women’s engagement in exhibitions is an important topic of modern Chinese history, but the current scholarship mostly focuses on national and international scales, overshadowing small-scale local exhibitions.³²⁷ Regions frequently holding local exhibitions were port cities that gathered elites and foreign settlers, who helped to cultivate robust media and oftentimes constituted patrons for embroiderers. I argue that local exhibitions constituted major venues for most students and played a crucial role in promoting them. It was interactions

³²⁶ Jin Zhi, “Shuo fengren yu cixiu zhi gongyong,” *Zhonghua funüjie* Vol. 2, No. 5 (1916): 1. The author was a student at Tongli 同里 Lize 麗則 women’s school.

³²⁷ See, for example, two articles on *Nanyang quanye hui* 南洋勸業會 – Guo Shumin, “Cong nügong dao nü meishujia: Yi Nanyang quanyehui zhi nüxing gongyi meishu zhanpin wei zhongxin,” *Meishu* 2017, (12): 98-101 and Yue Yi, “Nanyang quanyehui de xiupin yu Yangxia de *Cixiulun*,” *Sichou* 2004, (05): 46-47. Embroiderers’ participation in exhibitions is only briefly explored by Dorothy Ko’s discussion of Shen Shou’s international exposition experience. See Ko, “Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace,” 38-42.

between exhibitions and media that placed recently famed embroidery educators and their newly graduated students in front of the public and created a new, direct maker-viewer relationship.

Media, mainly newspapers and magazines in the Republican period, played a complex role advertising, recording, and criticizing embroidery exhibitions. Local exhibitions were either organized by one particular school to showcase works of the graduates or by local educational bureaus gathering works from various schools for competitions and critiques. Both forms expected to draw attention from local elites and to attract potential customers. In this respect, newspapers promptly advertised the events in advance to attract potential attendees and broadcasting the details to a larger audience afterwards. Further, when experts were invited to comment on the artworks, corresponding reports could become favorable articles to be printed by both newspapers and female educational magazines.³²⁸ It was through those interlocking actions that embroiderers found themselves under the spotlight encouraged to perform in public. The frequent reports on their monetary and honorary success might also have inspired more embroidery schools and students to thrive.

Women entering the public sphere is perhaps one of the most attended hallmarks signifying modernity, situating women in a wobbly position between demonization and liberation. Although modeled by celebrities who posed for their audience, the decision to show oneself to strangers, in words or in photos, or exhibitions, remained difficult for women in Republican China.³²⁹ Unlike current scholarship focusing on the dichotomous images of women

³²⁸ See, for example, an article published on *Xinwen bao* commentating on an embroidery exhibition that was shortly reprinted by magazine *Funiu zazhi* with a new title. See “Zhanlanhui Zhong zhi cixiu pingyi,” *Xinwen bao*, April 16, 1918 and “Jiangnan cixiu zhi yiban,” *Funiu zazhi* Vol. 4, No. 6 (1918): 6-7.

³²⁹ Although the visual presence of celebrities permeated film, advertisements and magazine covers, it was the rise of pictorials that brought commoners into the public eye. For this reason, pictorials such as *linglong* 玲瓏 and *liangyou* 良友 remain attractive topics drawing attention from scholars. For one example discussing *linglong*'s strategy encouraging the visual presentation of its audience, see Gary Wang, “Making ‘Opposite-Sex Love’ in Print: Discourse and Discord in *Linglong* Women’s Pictorial Magazine, 1931-1937.” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 2011, 13 (2): 266-75. In a Chinese language study, the author discusses the controversy

either as moral exemplars or erotic symbols,³³⁰ this study suggests an alternative view of women's public presence as being a means of self-promotion. Starting with reports about extraordinary embroiderers and pictures of embroidery artworks, the media allowed more and more embroiderers to present themselves publicly, especially after the enlightenment of the 1919 May Fourth Movement and the growth in popularity of pictorials in the 1920s.

Shanghai was home for numerous modern female schools, among which Meishu Cixiu Chuanxisuo 美術刺繡傳習所 (Fine Arts and Embroidery Education Institute, hereafter the Education Institute) was a reputable embroidery school that received much contemporary attention.³³¹ The Education Institute was founded by Zhang Shouyi 張守彝 and his wife Hua Qi 華璣. Both came from intellectual families in the Jiangnan area.³³² Hua would not have excelled as an embroidery reformer if not for her father Hua Hengfang 華蘅芳, a renowned mathematician who granted Hua privileged, open-minded family education open to novel concepts.³³³ Before Hua established the Education Institute in 1912, she had already been an experienced educator teaching embroidery in her hometown Wuxi, where she initiated her experiment on embroidery innovation after encountering an oil painting.³³⁴ Hua must also have

of female students entering public sphere that was reflected in visual culture. See Qin Fang, "Wanqing nüxue de shijue chengxian," in *Shehui shenghuo tansuo: Yi hunlian wenhua deng wei zhongxin*, edited by Liang Jinghe and Zhu Yimin (Beijing: Shoudu shifan daxue chubanshe, 2013), 264-276.

³³⁰ For two examples, see Sarah E. Stevens, "Figuring Modernity: The New Woman and the Modern Girl in Republican China," *Feminist Formations* 2003, 15 (3): 82-103 and Shaoqian Zhang, "Shaping the New Woman: The Dilemma of Shen in China's Republican Period," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 2018, 17 (3): 401-20.

³³¹ The Chuanxisuo was located at *gansu lu yongqing fang* 甘肅路永慶坊 in the Northern District which belonged to Shanghai's International Settlement. The Chuanxisuo sometime was referred as *Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo* 女子美術刺繡傳習所 and *Meishu nüzi cixiu chuanxisuo* 美術女子刺繡傳習所 in media.

³³² For Hua's biography see "Hua Qi nüshi cixiu ji xiaoying," *Meishu (Shanghai)* No. 2 (1919): 1 and Hua Qi, "Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiaozhang Hua Qi nüshi zhi yanshuo," *Xiangyan zazhi* No. 2 (1914): 1-4.

³³³ Hua Qi, "Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiaozhang Hua Qi nüshi zhi yanshuo," 1-2.

³³⁴ This experience is recounted in Hua's speech. See Hua Qi, "Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiaozhang Hua Qi nüshi zhi yanshuo," 2.

been motivated and influenced by her contemporaries - for example, Shen Shou, who attended the 1910 Nanyang Exposition as the chief examiner showcasing her phenomenal life-mimicking portrait, while Hua's work "*shanshui xiujian*" 山水繡件 (embroidery of landscape) only achieved fourth out of five ranks.³³⁵ As Hua's techniques improved, she participated in several international expositions in Belgium, Italy, and elsewhere, which gave rise to her cachet. In 1915 Hua reached the pinnacle of her career when she a top-tier award at Panama-Pacific International Exposition with her embroidery *Rooster* (figure 4.5).³³⁶



Figure 4.5 Hua Qi, "Rooster," in Shan Guoqiang, *Zhi xiu shu hua* (Shanghai: Shanghai kexu jishu chubanshe, 2009), 79.

Hua's embroidery philosophy was heavily influenced by her era identifying embroidery as a commodified form of art seeking international reputation and monetary value. She lamented

³³⁵ Bao Yong'an edited, Su Keqin annotated, *Nanyang quanyehui wenhui* (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaotong daxue chubanshe, 2010), 227.

³³⁶ "Hua Qi nüshi cixiu ji xiaoying." 1.

that Chinese embroidery was unpopular outside China, and she tried to solve that problem by teaching her contemporaries the techniques that had been acclaimed by the Queen of Italy.³³⁷ Following Shen Shou's practice applying Western painting skills, Hua's techniques took a similar approach emphasizing the subtleness of light and shadows, colour gradation, and three-dimensional perspective. Hua identified her embroidery as being in the same category with Shen's "*xiangzhen*" 像真 (mimicking reality) approach.³³⁸ Unlike Shen, who depicted real people with her needlework, Hua imitated different subjects to distinguish herself – mainly landscape and occasionally animals. Believing that "embroidery and painting are the same,"³³⁹ she argued that: "when stitching, (one should) regard the needle as the brush, take the thread like colour, and conflate the principles of embroidery and painting."³⁴⁰ She considered embroiderers artists painting on fabric with silk threads following the aesthetics of *xiangzhen* – imitating painting and imitating reality to vividly depict the image of an object. To create an artwork, Hua would first test and dye the threads personally to secure silk threads in the desired colours, and then she would treat her needles as paint brushes to create imagery without restricting herself to typical stitches. In contrast to traditional embroidery's pursuit of tight and dense stitches, Hua applied irregular stitches to maximize her creativity. For examples, she invented *lie zhen* 列箴 (literally aligned stitch, figure 4.6) to imitate sketching strokes and utilized layers of stitches with irregular lengths to depict grass.³⁴¹ These were never before seen in traditional Chinese embroidery.

³³⁷ Hua Qi, "Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiaozhang Hua Qi nüshi zhi yanshuo," 2.

³³⁸ Hua Qi, "Meishu cixiu chuanxisuo gailiang cixiu shuo," *Shenzhou nübao* No. 2 (1913): 157.

³³⁹ The original text is "繡與畫同." See Zhang Hua Qi, *Nüzi cixiu jiaokeshu*, 6.

³⁴⁰ The original text is "用箴時需視箴如筆，視線如色，繡法與畫法合之." Zhang Hua Qi, *Nüzi cixiu jiaokeshu*, 20

³⁴¹ Zhang Hua Qi, *Nüzi cixiu jiaokeshu*, 12, 47-49.



Figure 4.6 The demonstration of *lie zhen* (aligned stitch), in Zhang Hua Qi, *Nüzi cixiu jiaokeshu* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1926), 48.

Hua was an active proponent of the embroidery school that she founded as she utilized personal success as an advertisement for the school. Media articles often emphasized a close association between Hua's personal honor and her school. It is unclear how much influence Hua had over the article's content, but this association appears to be more than a coincidence – it was likely to be the product both of Hua's personal choice and public attention on female education. When Hua wrote articles explaining her embroidery philosophy and techniques for readers, she always included the school's name in the title.³⁴² In newspaper reports that showcase Hua's embroidery achievements, the titles are always associated with the school's name rather than claiming Hua's personal accomplishment.³⁴³ When Hua's honor was highly praised by the

³⁴² See, for example, Hua Qi, "Meishu cixiu chuanxisuo gailiang cixiu shuo."

³⁴³ Hua Qi, "Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiaozhang Hua Qi nüshi zhi yanshuo," "Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo: Xiupin shengwuhua shying," *Shibao*, March 31, 1914, and "Shanghai nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiu Wuxi Huishan Longtougou fengjing (zhaopian)," *Funiu zazhi* (Shanghai) Vol. 4, No. 7 (1918): 1.

Bureau of Industry and Commerce in the summer of 1913, multiple newspapers adopted the phrase “the honor of the Education Institute” in the title.³⁴⁴

In the winter of 1913, Hua organized a grand event to further promote the school – an exhibition that constituted a great opportunity publicizing the works and capability of the graduates. This interaction with locals and customers coincided with the school’s mission for “maintaining female fine art (education), assisting livelihood, and promoting (embroidery) career,” as described in the school constitution.³⁴⁵ To educate and promote students effectively, Hua designed a pragmatic plan – junior students were taught balanced courses including literature, English, math, painting, and handiworks; senior students focused on embroidery and were required to hand in most works, which were expected to be publicized and sold at exhibitions.³⁴⁶ The exhibition of winter 1913 turned out to be a huge success. Visitors came to the exhibition, admired the artworks, and purchased the most desirable ones – which served to promote the artworks, artists, and school. Media further publicized this event to a broader audience in Shanghai and beyond. Qian Bogui 錢伯圭, an intellectual from Hua’s hometown described this exhibition as a phenomenon in multiple newspapers: “more than thousands of people from China and abroad visited (the exhibition). Exquisite embroideries were greeted with nods of praise from everyone.”³⁴⁷

Hua’s painstaking efforts made the Education Institute an exemplary embroidery school in Shanghai. Associating Hua’s personal accomplishment with the advertisement of the school

³⁴⁴ “Cixiu chuanxisuo zhi rongyu,” *Xinwen bao*, June 24, 1913. “Gongshangbu jijiang meishu cixiu chuanxisuo,” *Shibao*, June 24, 1913.

³⁴⁵ “維持女子美術輔助生計推廣營業為宗旨,” in Hua Qi, “Meishu cixiu chuanxisuo gailiang cixiu shuo,” 158.

³⁴⁶ Hua Qi, “Meishu cixiu chuanxisuo gailiang cixiu shuo,” 158-59.

³⁴⁷ The original text is “海內外人士往觀者不下數千人，其繡品之精美，咸嘖嘖稱道之。” See Qian Bogui, “Canguan meishu cixiu chuanxisuo ji,” *Shenghuo ribao*, December 25, 1913. The article is also in *Xiangyan zazhi* No. 1 (1914): 2-3.

was, to a great extent, a strategic consideration. In her public speech at the end of 1912, one and a half years after the school was founded, Hua disclosed her deep concern over the schools' financial difficulties. She understood the importance of publicity as much as she understood her excellence in embroidery skills. She complained that her school was regarded as merely a "gimmick" amid countless educational programs in Shanghai, and thus it was vital to bring in attention and fame.³⁴⁸ Fortunately with Hua's effort gaining news reports and elite support in the following year, the school started to thrive in spring of 1914 and developed into a renowned institution maintaining its heyday for roughly ten years.

In contrast to the spotlight on the school, media gave limited publicity to the students. Writings in print media about the Education Institute in the 1910s largely fall into two categories: reports in newspapers, and articles in women's magazines. The former promptly reported awards that Hua Qi received and school exhibitions of the school in the form of brief accounts. The latter, with the patronage of female readership, often published Hua's articles explaining her updated ideas and techniques in detail. Both types of writings focused on Hua Qi herself and the school as a whole, without mentioning any of her students. This was in tune with the relatively conservative social norms in the early years of Republican China.³⁴⁹ Bao Tianxiao 包天笑, as the editor of a women's newspaper, commented on the difficulty in attaining photos of female intellectuals: "(young girls) were reluctant to show others their looks ... how was it possible for them to publicize their photos on periodicals for millions to examine?"³⁵⁰ Under this

³⁴⁸ Hua Qi, "Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiaozhang Hua Qi nüshi zhi yanshuo," 3-4.

³⁴⁹ The conservative elements of early modern Chinese female schools are pointed out by some scholars. For example, in her article, Qin Fang analyzes imagery of female students in the early twentieth century publication and discusses the traditional sexual conduct of the time. For her research, see Qin Fang, "Wanqing nüxue de shijue chengxian."

³⁵⁰ "不肯以色相示人...怎能以照片登載在書報上, 供萬人觀瞻呢?" Bao Tianxiao and Liu Yousheng annotated, *Chuanyinglou huiyilu*, *Chuanyinglou huiyilu Xubian* (Taiyuan: Sanjin chubanshe, 2014), 264.

circumstance, the publicizing of artworks was limited to promoting the school and selected works. Unlike Hua, her young students had few opportunities, and were less willing, to promote themselves directly and publicly.

Schools elsewhere in the 1910s experienced similar circumstances, seldom publicizing individual students. In media reports, group photos feature the school facilities, teachers, and students in class as a whole to introduce newly established embroidery schools.³⁵¹ The artworks of students were also photographed, but they were often seen as a collective rather than individual accomplishment.³⁵² Only occasionally, an individual work was featured with the creator's name and affiliation to show the school's achievement, while photos of the female students were rarely seen.

The conservative attitude toward press photography of females gradually changed as China's modernization progressed, especially after the 1919 May Fourth Movement. The development in photography and printing technology, in addition, gave rise to a growing number of educated females posing for newspaper and magazine photo shoots in the 1920s.³⁵³ This openness was embraced by modern coastal cities, and in North China, Tianjin was the exemplar. As the neighboring city of the national capital Beijing by the Bohai Bay, Tianjin used its geographic advantage to become a significant port city that enjoyed modern facilities including factories, schools, business areas, and cultural institutions. Like Shanghai, female embroidery schools flourished in Tianjin from 1910 onward, and in the 1920s, *Zhongguo Tuhua Cixiu*

³⁵¹ Examples see “Wuxi shili nūzi zhiye xuexiao cixiu shangke sheying.” *Jiaoyu zazhi* Vol. 5, No. 8 (1913): 1 and “Lujiang xianli diyi nūzi gaodeng xiaoxuexiao cixiu sheying.” *Anhui jiaoyu yuekan* No. 50 (1922): 1.

³⁵² Examples see “Ge xuexiao chenliepin sheying liu.” *Jiaoyu yu zhiye* No. 7 (1918): 1 and “Chao’an xianli nūxiao gaodeng jiaban cixiu chengji.” *Zhonghua jiaoyujie* Vol. 9, No. 4 (1920): 1.

³⁵³ For technical advancement in photography and printing, see Zhou Dengyan, “The Language of ‘Photography’ in China: A Genealogy of Conceptual Frames from *Sheying* to *Xinwen Sheying* and *Sheying Yishu*” (PhD diss., Binghamton University, State University of New York, 2016), 59-63.

Yanjiusuo 中國圖畫刺繡研究所 (China [Women's] Painting and Embroidery Research

Academy, hereafter the Academy) attracted much attention from local media.

The Academy was founded by an intellectual couple Gong Litian 龔禮田 and Chen Leru 陳樂如. Both born into families renowned for calligraphy and painting, Gong and Chen were well versed in Chinese traditional art. The establishment of the Institute was a response to the popularity of Western painting skills that overshadowed traditional techniques.³⁵⁴ The couple recounts that their devotion to the revival of Chinese traditional art was inspired by their visit to Japan in 1923, during which trip they were astonished at Japanese artists' mastering of Chinese traditional painting. They discovered that the secret for the maintenance of high-level excellence among Japanese artists was frequent communication within a small group and mutual discussion that benefited every member.³⁵⁵ Consequently, Chen established the Academy in 1927 upon her return to Tianjin with the help of her husband, which adopted a seminar mode only recruiting selected female students from local elite families. The Academy constituted a renowned female artistic research group that generated deep roots and influence in the local intellectual circle.

After its establishment, the Academy flourished for almost a decade before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, during which period the students interacted frequently with patrons and audiences. The Academy organized a graduation exhibition for the students annually, every one of which constituted a local phenomenon attracting numerous visitors. These exhibitions were highlighted by active, personal engagement of the female students, who arranged every detail from decorating the exhibition hall to welcoming visitors. Compared with women students one decade previous, they no longer hid behind embroidered pieces and instead,

³⁵⁴ “Zhongguo nüzi cixiu tuhua yanjiushe diqijie biyeban zhuanye,” *Meigui huabao* No. 34 (1936): 2.

³⁵⁵ Gong Litian, “Zhongguo nüzi tuhua cixiu yanjiusuo xiaoshi,” *Beiyang huabao* Vol. 14, No. 688 (1931): 2.

publicly reinforced their identity as celebrated artists.³⁵⁶ Individual artists and artwork received vigorous support from patrons, who sponsored the Academy monetarily for further development and more intellectual activities.

Press constituted a larger stage with a broader audience for the students to perform for. The first graduation exhibition at Dahua Restaurant between June 14th and 16th in 1929, for example, proved to be successful.³⁵⁷ The event attracted attention from the local press *Beiyang huabao* 北洋畫報 (*Beiyang Pictorial*), whose editors were firm advocates of traditional art and who continued to report on the Academy in the following years.³⁵⁸ The report in 1929 had a visual focus featuring three photos, with one displaying the exhibition hall, one capturing an image of several students in motion, and one highlighting an individual student with her artwork. In this way, the newspaper presented multiple aspects of the exhibition carefully from people to objects, from an overview to individuals, and from static status to motion. Outside Tianjin, the visual focus was highlighted by pictorials as well. *Shanghai manhua* 上海漫畫 (Shanghai Caricature) printed two group photos featuring female students of the Academy. In both photos, the ladies are situated in an elegant outdoor environment surrounded by plants and flowers. Some of them held a fan as a decorative device indicating their cultural identity. The gathering appears unplanned with eyes looking anywhere but not the camera, creating a casual, genteel vibe (figure 4.7).³⁵⁹

³⁵⁶ For the account of personal engagement, see “Zhongguo nüzi tuhua cixiu yanjiusuo zhi chengji.” *Tianjin shangbao huakan* Vol. 3, No. 26 (1931): 1.

³⁵⁷ *Beiyang huabao* Vol. 7, No. 336 (1929): 1.

³⁵⁸ Wang Yanshu, “Minguo shiqi Tianjin *Beiyang huabao* yanjiu,” (PhD diss., Nankai University, 2013), 124.

³⁵⁹ *Shanghai manhua* Vol. 62 (1929): 2.



Figure 4.7 Report on the first exhibition of the school, in *Shanghai Manhua*, 1929, Issue 62.

In the reports on other graduation exhibitions in the following years, the students continued to be placed under the spotlight. When reporting exhibitions of 1934 and 1935, *Beiyang huabao* published group photos of the students without presenting any of their works. In the 1934 photo, the teacher sat front and center while the students stood in a line behind. The students in the 1935 photo were positioned in a more casual way, sitting in groups of two or three. The two photos implied that even in group photos individualism was celebrated with distinct personal features and individual names in the captions. Students were dressed in simple, elegant long qipao, posing as female intellectuals embracing the spotlight.³⁶⁰ The highlight of the Academy came in 1936 when *Meigui huabao* 玫瑰畫報 offered a special page featuring the seventh graduation exhibition of the school. The pictorial is composed of three articles narrating the achievement of the Institute along with multiple photos showing the artworks, the students, and the teachers. When presenting the ladies, every image depicts individual artists in the middle

³⁶⁰ “Tianjin Zhongguo tuhua cixiu yanjiusuo diwuci biye shisheng heying.” *Beiyang huabao* Vol. 22, No. 1053 (1934): 1. “Benshi zhongguo nüzi tuhua cixiu yanjiusuo benjie biye xuesheng yu jiaoyuan heying.” *Beiyang huabao* Vol. 26, No. 1264 (1935): 1. Note that most students in China Women’s Research Institute of Painting and Embroidery studied painting while only a few focusing on embroidery. However, in the photos, they did not distinguish themselves in any respect.

of art creation, situated in a graceful environment decorated by artworks and plants.³⁶¹ The ladies were clearly aware that they were presenting their bodies, gestures, and works to narrate stories via visual presentation. Their artistic identities were thus circulated and reinforced via readership in their own intellectual circle and to a large audience.

Problems and Dilemmas

Embroidery education in the early twentieth century was a process imbued with passion for women's artistic cultivation and economic independence. Media celebration, unfortunately, belied problems and dilemmas that many faced. On the one hand, exemplary embroiderers obtained fame and honor via their publicized works and their contribution to female education. On the other hand, less-famous schools and average students struggled from the beginning with mediocre performance. Generally speaking, embroidery education saw an overall growth in the 1910s and 1920s. However, after entering the 1930s, the Great Depression hit China's Western-oriented embroidery business and its export market hard. Staff had to be let go, enrollment fell at most schools, and eventually the financial crisis forced the closure of many schools and programs.

At the heart of the problems for modernized Chinese embroidery was a dilemma that came with its reformative nature. Advances in knowledge and technology fostered masters like Shen Shou and Hua Qi, but the majority of embroidery learners could not satisfy that criterion. As discussed before, embroidery reform in the early twentieth century started without the theoretical basis grounded by fine arts and material readiness of dyed yarn. This environment, on the one hand, nurtured true reformers, but on the other hand, intimidated many educators and

³⁶¹ “Zhongguo nüzi cixiu tuhua yanjiushe diqijie biyeban zhuanye,” *Meigui huabao* No. 34 (1936): 2.

students. Every embroiderer emphasized the significance of painting skills, yet no one specified the genre. As a result, Hua Qi took inspiration from varied Western artistic genres, while Chen Leru and her students followed literati paintings.

This fundamental defect resulted in a blending of a small number of qualified schools and more programs which only purported to be new and modern. Beneath the veneer of modernization it was observed that most schools “had no plan,”³⁶² and that individual works were “unnatural” or “with patterns too old.”³⁶³ In 1918, Bao Gu Shizhao 包顧式照, a Japan-returned embroidery teacher offered commentary on an exhibition, in which she explained the problems of Chinese embroidery:

Traditional embroiderers only know about the old, and innovative embroiderers only know about the new. The old continues to follow the obsolete models of a hundred years ago, while the new almost forget all China’s various stitches...Painting principles are not comprehended, stitches are dull, and colouring is not considered, these are the common deficiencies of Chinese old embroidery... To correct the drawbacks, unless new artists with the thoughts of fine arts must be created to replace the current teaching staff of wives and ladies, otherwise, the feat is unachievable.³⁶⁴

This comment precisely summarizes the awkwardness of Republican embroidery education: the knowledge of fine arts was too difficult to be apprehended even by educators themselves, and thus students could do little more than imitate. So long as success depended on

³⁶² “全無蹤跡。” In Hua Qi, “Nüzi meishu cixiu chuanxisuo xiaozhang Hua Qi nüshi zhi yanshuo,” 3.

³⁶³ “欠自然”，“花式太古”。 In “Ben yixian jiaoyu chengji zhanlanhui nü shifan gaoxiao xiao cixiuke baogaobiao,” 8.

³⁶⁴ “舊者只知有舊，新者唯知有新。其舊者猶是百年以前之古化，新者幾全忘中國之有種種繡法...畫理不通，針法呆板，設色不經，此為中國舊繡之通病.....欲救其弊，非造就有美術思想之新藝術家，代今之一般太太刺繡教授，勿能為功。” Originally in “Zhanlanhui zhong zhi cixiu pingyi,” and reprinted as “Jiangnan cixiu zhi yiban.”

individual talent rather than systematic training that fit all, China's embroidery reform would only be a platform to glorify the few.

Furthermore, there was a discrepancy in the perception of embroidery between the West and the East. *Meishu* 美術 or “fine art” was an idea borrowed from the West and applied to new embroidery. In 1915, when Shen Shou sent her embroidered portrait of Jesus to the fine art department of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, her work was rejected as the Western tradition usually considered embroidery decorative art or applied art. After submitting the embroidery to the correct department, she eventually received the top-tier award. This incident was recorded by a contemporary intellectual Qiu Yulin 裘毓麟 in his 1916 article. Yet interestingly enough, Qiu did not point out this fundamental conceptual difference. Instead, he suggested the problem was that Shen's embroidery was a copy of a Western oil painting. He warned international exhibition participants to hide the lack of originality whenever possible: “even if (the submitted embroidery) is an imitation of an antique work, it is not necessary to mark the image with such descriptive words.”³⁶⁵ The modernization of Chinese embroidery was thus also a constant self-correction process to adapt to Western standards, which did not always yield fruitful results.³⁶⁶

Therefore, the predicament that Republican embroidery faced also came from an imagined market consisting of foreign customers whose taste was, ironically, consistent with a Chinese understanding of the West and modernity. The investigation of what foreigners “liked” did not always offer a correct answer. Adding to this problem was the fact that the domestic

³⁶⁵ The original text reads: “雖仿古之作，亦不必留模仿字樣於畫上。” In Qiu Yulin, “Zhongguo cixiu zhi lishi jite,” *Zhonghua funü jie* 1916, Vol. 2, No. 1: 5.

³⁶⁶ A similar statement is made by Dorothy Ko's case study of Shen Shou embroidery that Shen believed that the fine stitches of Chinese embroidery would better attract Western eyes than the coarse stitches of Japanese embroidery, but she did not understand that it was delicacy that defined Chinese embroidery more of a craft than art. See Ko, “Between the Boudoir and the Global Marketplace,” 52-53.

market was not yet ready to fully accept the aesthetic transition proposed by intellectuals.

Accordingly, when embroiderers failed to gain support from preferred customers, they would have to cater to the available market to survive.

Entering the 1930s, when the problems that embroidery education faced became more evident, media started to reveal some less-inspiring stories. Zhenji Nüzi Cixiu Xueshe 貞記女子刺繡學社 (Zhenji Female Embroidery School) in Tianjin was one such example that represented the circumstances of an average embroidery school of the time. Founded at the beginning of Republican China, principal Wang Shuzhen 王淑貞 herself graduated from a modernized embroidery school. Being enthusiastic at the beginning, Wang visited Shanghai and Suzhou for advanced teaching and managing experience. The school operated well during its early days, but eventually lost the advantage that embroidery schools could supply daily objects and accessories, such as handkerchiefs, sashes, and skirts, to local textile shops. Wang complained about the poor taste of the locals, but unfortunately this was the market which they had to satisfy for survival.³⁶⁷

The situation of Zhenji was not a unique case. Low enrollment and an unpromising market would eventually result in financial deficits for the school. In the 1930s, as social and economic environments became unstable, this difficulty was experienced by more and more schools. When the great depression swept across Western countries and warfare blocked transportation, Chinese embroidery lost significant customers from trade fairs, overseas buyers, foreign settlers, and some domestic patrons. Programs and schools received limited subsidies

³⁶⁷ The interview with Wang, see “Jinshi zhiye de funü shenghuo: Nüzi cixiu xueshe yiban.” *Dagong bao (Tianjin)*, March 15, 1930.

from local educational bureaus, and the 1930s witnessed the closure of more and more embroidery schools and the removal of embroidery programs from female schools.³⁶⁸

To counteract the setbacks, some embroidery schools actively sought solutions, refusing to be passive victims. Fundraising via opera shows was a common practice greeted with endorsement from local elites. One example was Beiping Huizhong Cixiu Nüxiaoxiao 北平惠中刺繡女校, whose principal solicited support from a lawyer friend and opera actors to raise funds by performing to rescue the school from financial crisis in 1932.³⁶⁹ An embroidery school in Beijing experienced a similar financial predicament. At Zhenhua 振華 (revive China) school, having herself graduated from a modernized female embroidery school, the founder was aware of the association of female independence with China's revival. Cheng established the school in 1933, but struggled to cover rent, salaries, and other miscellaneous expenditures. In the winter of 1934, the school held a fundraiser. Unfortunately, as many other organizations managed to attract economic support via similar methods, the performance received with little attention and limited patronage. One month later, the school called for help via a newspaper. Again, this move likely garnered insufficient aid as the president advertised in the newspaper three times in the following month.³⁷⁰ Zhenhua was a typical example demonstrating the awkward situation of embroidery education in the 1930s, as schools that relied on charity were impossible to survive long. And eventually, the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 put an end to China's embroidery education.

³⁶⁸ Hanying Nüzi Zhiye Xuexiao 含英女子職業學校 was an example of a school that received the financial grant. See *Minguo Lilingxian zhi* (1948), 660, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers. For the removal of a embroidery program, see the example in *Anhui caizheng gongbao* No. 15 (1932): 135-36.

³⁶⁹ "Xiao xiaoxi." *Tianjin shangbao huakan* Vol. 5, No. 16 (1932): 2.

³⁷⁰ "Beiping zhenhua cixiu chuanxisuo jingfei jieju shijiang zhongchuo." *Yishi bao* (Tianjin), December 25, 1934. "Cixiu chuanxisuo zai qiuyuan." *Yishi bao* (Tianjin), January 15, 1935.

Conclusion

The embroidery reviving movement that occurred in the first three decades of the twentieth century was launched under calls for creating a commodified art for the high-end, international market. To attract foreign customers, Chinese embroidery needed to update its technical excellence in accordance with a modernized surrounding environment. Female embroiderers, such as Shen Shou and Hua Qi, took on the responsibility of modernizing the aesthetics and techniques of embroidery. By mastering painting, dying, and embroidering skills, they controlled the entire process of making embroidered pieces. In this way, they transformed themselves from technicians to artists, replacing the old mode in which the technical virtuosity of female embroiderers yielded to a framework created by professional male painters. These female reformers further granted themselves the role of educator, spreading their knowledge to a maximum extent involving generations of students. This movement was celebrated by awards from international expositions, success at domestic exhibitions, and publicity of artists and their artworks. News reports and magazines were active participants in this movement, which broadcasted embroideries and embroiderers to a large audience – they were advertisers, reporters, and commentators. Female students who graduated from modern schools enjoyed their new identity as artist, promoted their works at exhibitions and via media, and even advertised themselves publicly. This movement, on the other hand, was limited by its ambition – the movement was a process of mass-producing celebrated artists, yet artist was not a title that everyone could deserve. Embroidery education was further hindered by unrealistic expectations for the market, short staffing, low student enrollment and financial crises. The reform eventually came to an end when the 1930s depression and war crushed the international and domestic market.

Chapter Five

America and Shanghai: Cross-Stitch Popularity

A Pattern Book

Figure 5.1 is a pattern book that introduces the technology of cross-stitch, the imported Western-style embroidery that was welcomed by Chinese city girls in the 1920s. Featuring a young lady in a heavily patterned fashionable outfit who is sitting in front of a wooden frame and embroidering, the cover image implies how a young Shanghai girl self-made her textile materiality. In the foreground of the image, a pattern implies the importance of the materiality to



Figure 5.1 Front cover image of *Shanghai Meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 6 (1927). Photographed by the author. Personal collection of the author.

which the image is attached – the pattern book is the source of knowledge for the embroiderer. By offering a clear visual depiction of how the book would be used, the cover image presents a visual linkage between two different materials – decorative fabric and paper that helped to construct it.

This pattern book also creates a hybrid entity rooted in both Western and Chinese cultures. The cover girl is dressed in a high-collared, half-sleeved top skirt suit, reflecting a Western-inspired, innovative Chinese style with a neat silhouette.³⁷¹ Her surroundings, in comparison, are constructed as a Western-styled, modern indoor environment. The back cover continues the hybrid design with a bilingual title – “上海美華十字挑繡圖” (Shanghai Mei Hwa



Figure 5.2 Back cover of *Shanghai Meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 6 (1927). Photographed by the author.

Personal collection of the author.

³⁷¹ In contrast to wide robes in pre-modern China, women after the 1911 Xinhai Revolution started to wear narrow-cut, high-collar clothes. See discussion in Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 92-95.

Cross-Stitch Patterns) and its English equivalent “the Cross Stitchbook” (figure 5.2). The back cover specifies that the book was the sixth publication among a series issued by Mei Hwa Art Embroidering Company of Shanghai in August 1927.³⁷²

The book consists of twelve colour-printed pages of cross-stitch patterns, which were designed by art experts to be suitable for a variety of daily decorations, ranging from pillowcases, to shoes, to purses. As the hybrid approach of the cover pages implies, the patterns included in the book are unsurprisingly a combination of Chinese and Western styles. The designs frequently adopt signs of success and fortune for Chinese auspicious expression. Characters with favorable meanings, such as “福壽” (good fortune and longevity), “百年好合” (a hundred years of harmonious marriage) adorn the patterns with artistic fonts. Auspicious images are common – for example, *hulu* 葫蘆 (calabash), the homophone of *fulu* 福祿 (good fortune and emolument) and *yunpeng wanli* 雲鵬萬里 (clouds and roc over ten thousand *li*) that anticipates a bright future.³⁷³ The first page, “百事如意” (a hundred things that you want would come your way) pillowcase is an exemplar of the Chinese-Western hybrid (figure 5.3). With centering wheat ears and incense on an offering table, this embroidery pattern conveys the traditional Chinese design concept seeking blessing and good omen. In contrast, the ornamental patterns on the border introduce a Western-influenced aesthetic: curved vines that are common in European design embellish the four borders, and instead of the five or nine bats tradition, four

³⁷² For any description of the book in the following section, see *Shanghai meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 6 (1927). The book is in the personal collection of the author.

³⁷³ Roc is a mythological bird with great size and strength. The famous pre-Qin classic “Xiaoyao you” from Zhuangzi describes that “Roc’s incredible wingspan is thousands of miles wide 鵬之背，不知其幾千里也。” See Zhuangzi, “Xiaoyao you,” in *Zhuangzi*, in the database Chinese Text Project.

bats occupy four corners of the pillowcase respectively – four bats (*sifu* 四福) are not phonetically felicitous but viable for a symmetric layout.

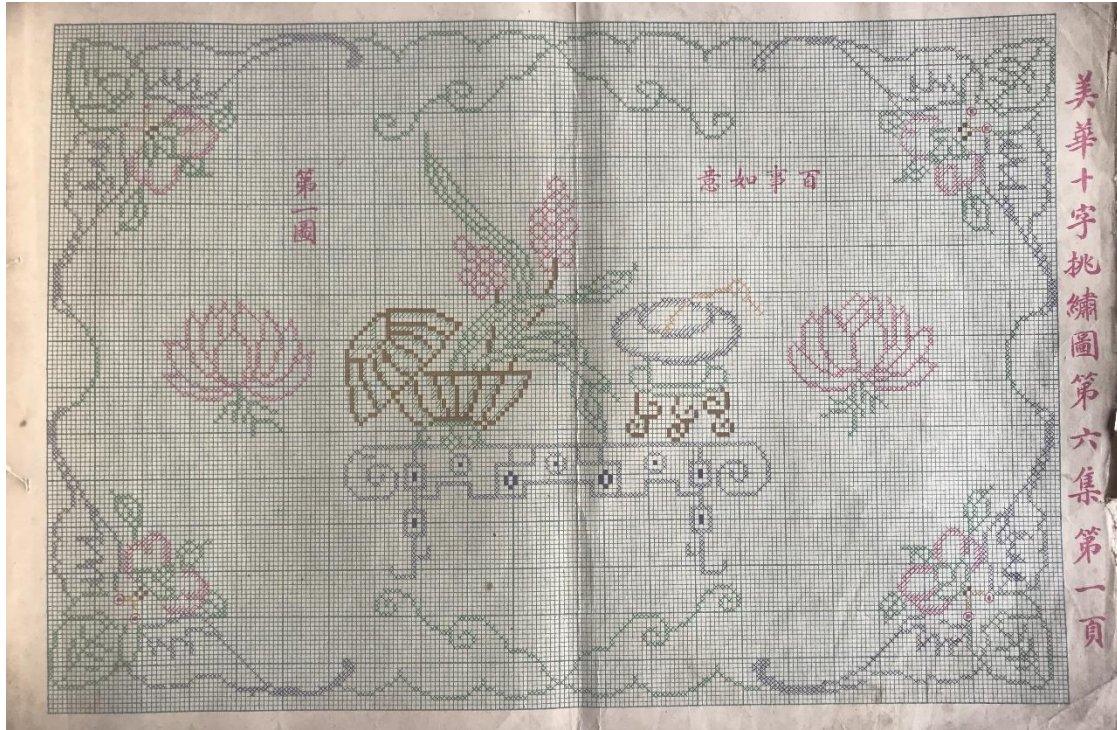


Figure 5.3 Cross-stitch pillowcase pattern, *Shanghai Meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 6 (1927): 1. Photographed by the author. Personal collection of the author.

This pattern book is a convenient, practical learning solution tool for homebased cross-stitch makers. The large size of each page - fifteen inches long and ten inches wide - delineates clearly instructed details for users to study and copy. As advertised on the title page, Mei Hwa company established a sophisticated network selling the pattern book series at bookstores, textile shops, and department stores in Shanghai and other major cities across China. In addition, cross-stitch threads and fabrics were available via Mei Hwa's postage sale service. As such, the company made patterns, materials, and methods available for any beginners who would like to experiment with this art. And more importantly, the company astutely applied their marketing strategy on cross-stitch embroidery, a low-threshold embroidery that can be self-taught. A

sample embroidery work on a piece of canvas and a pinch of threads were found in this book, which demonstrates the material trace of “work in progress” from an earlier owner (figure 5.4). This is solid evidence of the success of Mei Hwa in making material available to its readers. This pattern book reveals a fashion system that encouraged hybrid designs and techniques self-taught by commoners.



Figure 5.4 A sample embroidery work on a piece of canvas and a pinch of threads found between pages of the book. Photographed by the author. Personal collection of the author.

The embroidery genre that the book specializes in – cross-stitch – remains an untapped field by researchers in Chinese history. Despite the sheer volume of extant cross-stitch pattern books and cross-stitch fabrics on the antique market, their materiality is little studied. Although some scholarly attention is given to Chinese blue-and-white cross-stitch that was defined as folk art in museum collections, polychrome cross-stitch is largely unknown in both academic and

popular perception.³⁷⁴ In contrast to its rustic counterpart made by peasants, Shanghai cross-stitch represented city girls' do-it-yourself attitude toward decorating their home in the latest fashion.

From these objects arise a series of historical questions: in what context did Western-styled cross-stitch arrive in China and how did it become a fashionable practice embraced by city residents? How did embroiderers access the techniques, designs, and materials needed for cross-stitch? Further, how did this self-making attitude ally with the image of a modern, fashionable Chinese girl? This chapter will trace the history of Chinese polychrome cross-stitch as a technology introduced by Western missionaries, a business mostly organized by American firms, and a handiwork first produced by Chinese peasant women and later by city girls. I argue that designs and patterns, rather than skills, constituted the crucial link in the making of cross-stitch embroidery that made the successful organization of peasants and its acceptance by city girls possible.

Stitching Imported Patterns

During China's early twentieth century, people constantly invented new things that synthesized local and imported knowledge. If lifelike embroidery discussed in the previous chapter demonstrated the history of Chinese reformers who actively updated embroidery techniques with imported ideas, then the subject of this chapter, cross-stitch, was by no means new and modern. As the following section will show, the embroidery technique of making cross

³⁷⁴ The pioneer work in Western academia is conducted by Carl Schuster who collected blue-and-white cross-stitch embroideries from China and wrote his doctoral dissertation based on his collections. See Carl Shuster, "Chinesische Bauernstickereien," PhD diss., University of Vienna, 1934. The major body of his collections is now kept in the Field Museum.

patterns had been practiced in both China and Europe, and Chinese embroiderers were largely organized following the traditional nineteenth-century mode. Only the design was a new phenomenon.

The history of cross-stitch must be read against the background of the embroidery reform in the early twentieth century. Known as Chinoiserie, China's export textiles were exotic luxury goods popularized among the upper class in Europe during the high Qing period.³⁷⁵ However, as Chapter Four discusses, at the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese exports faced strong competition from neighboring countries, such as Japan, which reformed its industries for the international market. To regain Chinese embroidery's lead position on the international stage, embroidery reformers created artistic works for the high-end foreign market. In this movement, although exceptional individuals received significant reputational gains and monetary awards from international patrons, the majority struggled to transform themselves from technicians to artists. Ironically, what actually contributed to the profitability of the Chinese textile industry via international trade, was low-end embroideries that required minimal skills, often made by peasant women. Supported by China's cheap labor, this low-threshold, mass-produced decorative fabric involved China in the international market.

China's success in becoming a supplier of decorative textiles was thanks to the rise of America as a global power in the late nineteenth century. Since then, America constituted a competition stage for products, including household textiles, from around the globe. America's desire for international goods started with exotic items from culturally interesting nations, including China. To decorate their houses, middle-class American women oftentimes arranged a

³⁷⁵ McCants suggests the established tradition for foreign textiles to decorate European homes started much earlier and on a larger scale than is commonly assumed – as early as the eighteenth century into the homes of the working class. Anne E. C. McCants, "Exotic Goods, Popular Consumption, and the Standard of Living: Thinking About Globalization in the Early Modern World," *Journal of World History* 18, 4 (2007): 456.

“cozy corner” to display exotic items, partaking in their nation’s commercial expansion, and perhaps to fantasize about distant lands.³⁷⁶ However, in the early twentieth century fashionable décor shifted toward simplicity and the cozy corner lost its appeal.³⁷⁷ Neutral wall colours and simple furnishing became popular, and exotic furnishings were replaced by light ornamental textiles such as tablecloths, napkins, and cushion covers. These fine, soft fabrics with delicate patterns and vivid colours were perfect decorative and functional additions to a modern home.³⁷⁸

Chinese manufacturers began to experiment with Western-style decorative fabrics after the mid-nineteenth century. As the Qing empire signed one treaty after another with Western powers, colonial businessmen began to employ Chinese laborers to produce decorative fabrics such as lace, drawnwork, and cross-stitch textiles.³⁷⁹ Although lace and drawnwork are easily confused due to their similar appearance, they are constructed by distinct methods. Lace is usually a knitting job that creates the fabric by looping, plaiting, or twisting the threads. Drawnwork, in contrast, pulls yarns on the existing fabric to insert decorative stitches or to build patterns as relief, and thus is often classified as one type of embroidery.³⁸⁰ Both textile works

³⁷⁶ A “cozy corner” is space at home for middle-class women to display low-cost Oriental items, usually heavily decorated with textiles such as cushions, valances, and rugs. The cozy corner exemplifies “cosmopolitan domesticity,” a term coined by Hoganson to explain the material connection between American homes and the outside world. See Kristin Hoganson, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865-1920,” *The American Historical Review* 2002, 107 (1): 60, 70-71. America’s material cosmopolitanism in the late nineteenth century is also discussed in Bradley C Brooks, “Clarity, Contrast, and Simplicity: Changes in American Interiors, 1880-1930,” in *The Arts and the American Home, 1890-1930*, edited by Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 14-21.

³⁷⁷ For the decline of exoticism and the trend toward simplicity in early twentieth-century interior design, see Hoganson, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity,” 82-83; Brooks, “Clarity, Contrast, and Simplicity,” 21-22. In her article, Marling discusses American house decorations that were created by mass culture before the Great Depression. See Karal Ann Marling, “From the Quilt to the Neocolonial Photograph: The Arts of the Home in an Age of Transition,” in *The Arts and the American Home, 1890-1930*, edited by Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling, 1-13. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994.

³⁷⁸ The contrast of large and small items in designs and colours was suggested by contemporary interior magazines, which is discussed in Brooks, “Clarity, Contrast, and Simplicity,” 25.

³⁷⁹ There is some research on these imported textile works composed in the Chinese language, which are mostly case studies. See, for example, Wang Xuelin, “Yantai chousha huabian yanjiu,” (Master’s Thesis, Shandong University of Art and Design, 2014).

³⁸⁰ For an introduction to lace and drawnwork, see “Embroidery” and “Lace” in Jennifer Harris ed, *5,000 Years of Textiles* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 31-33, 34-35.

require proficiency in skills regarding calculations of threads and memorization of relations among patterns, which is achievable through short-term training. Thus, because of its simple technology, these foreign-introduced decorative textiles were intelligible to uneducated Chinese workers.

Similar to drawnwork and lace, cross-stitch was technically accessible to the majority. Moreover, among the various types of foreign-introduced textiles, cross-stitch was not novel to the Chinese. Known as *tiaohua* 挑花, stitching indigo-dyed blue threads onto white cotton fabric in small crosses to compose large patterns or vice versa was widely used by peasant families across China for decoration and practicality. *Tiaohua* is less difficult than other stitching techniques – tiny crosses are made on a piece of fabric with visible warp and weft (figure 5.5).³⁸¹ Because of the durability of the textile, it was used for a wide range of functional and decorative



Figure 5.5 Both embroideries are finished by stitching small crosses onto the fabric. While the Chinese-originated one features the colour combination of blue and white, the Western-introduced piece employs polychrome threads. Left: bed valance at the Textile Museum of Canada (accession No. T97.0020). Courtesy of the

³⁸¹ Zhao Hongyan, Ye Hongguang, and Hong Yu, “Huangmei tiaohua yu shizixiu de duibi yanjiu,” *Tianjin fangzhi keji* No.2 (2019): 3.

Textile Museum of Canada. Right: collection at the Royal Ontario Museum (accession No. 981.189.13). Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum.

applications including, for example, bedding, valance, table covers, and clothing.³⁸² With familiar techniques, Chinese embroiderers connected easily to cross-stitch. Moreover, unlike the designs of lace and drawnwork that were usually abstract patterns, both *tiaohua* and cross-stitch patterns typically depict specific animal and human figures as well as objects.³⁸³ Therefore, when cross-stitch came to China, it was accessible to many.

Thus, lace, drawnwork, and cross-stitch embroidery became a burgeoning sector in the Chinese textile business. Since the late 1910s, decorative textiles, including lace and embroidery from East Asian producers, presented as a strong competitor of European needlework in the American market.³⁸⁴ Moreover, European and British textile industries were damaged by the First World War.³⁸⁵ Consequently, by the 1920s Chinese decorative textiles had largely replaced European goods in the American market.

Inside China, competition between cities stimulated quality and specialization. The old trade center of Guangdong continued with its strength in decorative textile production with the shift from Guangzhou to Shantou. Nascent port cities also became bases for foreign traders.

³⁸² The pioneer English work on this little-studied subject was done by Carl Schuster, who composed his doctoral dissertation “Chinese Peasant Embroidery” in 1936 and sold his rich collection of blue-and-white cross-stitch embroideries to The Field Museum in Chicago. See Carl Schular, “Chinesischen Bauernstickerei.” (Chinese peasant embroidery) PhD diss., University of Vienna, 1934.

³⁸³ Interestingly enough, much of the Chinese scholarship claims the ancient invention of the cross stitch in various regions in China and its direct influence on the birth of European cross-stitch. This view not only contradicts each region within China but also ignores the fact that early cross-stitch was documented worldwide. Due to the scarcity of historical sources, it is perhaps impossible to verify the origin of cross-stitch or to prove its spontaneity in any culture. Although the stitching methods are the same, the materials, motifs and cultural meanings employed in *tiaohua* and cross-stitch are very different. For one study on cross-stitch origin debate, see Zhao Hongyan, Ye Hongguang, and Hong Yu, “Huangmei tiaohua yu shizixiu de duibi yanjiu,” 1-4. Example of the claim of a collector, see Ye Yun, *Lao Xiang xiu de shoucang* (Changsha: Hunan kexue jishu chubanshe, 2013), 72-73,

³⁸⁴ Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, United States Department of Commerce, *Commerce Reports*, 1917 July-Sep, 76.

³⁸⁵ See Ollerenshaw’s discussion on the changes to the European linen industry by WWI and its long-term impact. See Philip Ollerenshaw, “Textile Business in Europe During the First World War: The Linen Industry, 1914-18,” *Business History* 1999, 41 (1): 63–87.

Shandong province, for instance, and especially Yantai emerged as a new center with several coastal cities producing export embroidery and drawnwork.³⁸⁶ In 1922 the Chinese Customs authorities in Shantou levied a five percent tax on exported embroideries, yet this did not impact the popularity of the products.³⁸⁷ In 1925, the American Department of Commerce reported that China ranked first as a source to the United States for importing drawnwork, and third for embroidery on linen and ramie cloth. Each locale was synonymous with its product – for example, Shantou for drawnwork, Shanghai for Venetian cutwork, and Beijing for cross-stitch.³⁸⁸ These textile centers were operated on a shared mode of decorating imported foreign cloths. As discussed in Chapter Four, facing competition from highly mechanized Western fabrics, Chinese textile industry was in decline.³⁸⁹ Although China attempted to modernize textile production, it was inadequate to build comparable factories in a short time. As both qualities of Chinese raw materials and mechanization failed to meet the export standard, the market shifted from textile manufacturing to textile processing.³⁹⁰ With the advantage of cheap labor and increasingly improved quality, Chinese decorative textiles were unbeatable.

In the early twentieth century, foreign investors largely built their business on China's existing putting-out system. In the nineteenth-century the Chinese embroidery industry had incorporated numerous peasant embroiderers into China's domestic economic network. And

³⁸⁶ Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, United States Department of Commerce, *Commerce Reports*, 1921 Sep-Dec, 1016.

³⁸⁷ Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, United States Department of Commerce, *Commerce Reports*, 1922 Jul-Sep, 620.

³⁸⁸ Edwin S. Cunningham, "The Chinese Embroidery Industry," *Commerce Reports*, 1926, No. 40: 16-17. According to a "reliable estimate" in the article, America was also China's biggest export market with 80 percent of exporting embroidery going to the USA.

³⁸⁹ This point can be further attested by statistics of silk weaving business in sericulture centers of Nanjing, Suzhou, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou. See Peng Zeyi, ed. *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao* Vol. 2 (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 1957), 450-54.

³⁹⁰ U. S. Department of Commerce, *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, Vol. 3, 1941, Apr-Jun, 45. C. O. Spamer, "Chinese Lace and Embroidery Industry," in *Commerce Reports* Vol.1 Thirty-fifth Year, edited by United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1932), 358-59.

although foreign manufacturers benefitted from extraterritoriality in the treaty ports, they did not have direct access to the Chinese labor market.³⁹¹ Having no experience working with Chinese, foreigners typically deferred to the established Chinese system of peasant embroiderers.³⁹² Thus, instead of building new workshops and factories, this business mode relied on the middleman – a Chinese local comprador hired to mediate between the exporting company and part-time laborers. The comprador either dispatched work to rural women and children who worked at home in their spare time or collected ready-made embroideries from homestay workers or a subordinate middleman.³⁹³ Typical cross-stitch products included beddings, tablecloths, runners, lunch sets, and banquet cloths. Cotton and linen textiles were considered most suitable, according to one analyst, because they could be washed in hot water after becoming “extremely dirty” from being handled by Chinese peasants.³⁹⁴

The design was a salient problem for the Chinese workers, especially in the less-familiar textile forms, namely lace and drawnwork. As the two textiles were alien to the workers, they mostly memorized fixed patterns and designs, which were borrowed from their rivals. European designs were frequently copied, among which the Italian and French patterns were the most welcomed. After adopting the outside patterns, it was also conventional for Chinese peasants to copy designs from each other.³⁹⁵

³⁹¹ For a discussion of the difficulties, see Wang Ertong, “Maiban,” *Jingji changshi* 1935, No. 1: 98-99.

³⁹² Lace schools were equal establishments that offered quick training. See Peng Zeyi, ed. *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao* Vol. 3 (Beijing: Shenghuo, dushu, xinzhi sanlian shudian, 1957), 175-76.

³⁹³ Comprador, in Chinese 買辦, originally supervised by the Qing government to restrict the power and activities of foreign businessmen before the late Qing, soon became important middlemen after foreign investment entered China. Depending on their language skills and local connections, compradors maneuvered between labors and traders and gained considerable wealth at the turn of the twentieth century. For comprador, see Cunningham, “The Chinese Embroidery Industry,” 17 and Wang Xi, “Guanyu maiban he maiban zhidu,” *Jindaishi yanjiu* 1980, (02): 171-216.

³⁹⁴ Spamer, “Chinese Lace and Embroidery Industry,” 359.

³⁹⁵ According to “Reproduction of French Modes in Chinese Silk is on Wane,” *Millard’s Review of the Far East*, Nov 6, 1920 and Spamer, “Chinese Lace and Embroidery Industry,” 359, French mode was most copied before and during the early 1920s, while Cunningham in 1926 suggested that Italian works were new favorites to be reproduced. See Cunningham, “The Chinese Embroidery Industry,” 17.

In some circumstances, however, cross-stitch was reinvented by Chinese embroiderers who enjoyed some level of freedom in inventing Chinese-themed designs. Due to the lack of sources, it is unclear how these designs were created. It was likely a result from the collaboration of two parties: individual embroiderers who submitted ready-made products and the comprador who oversaw the putting-out system with feedback from the American market. According to a commerce report, cross-stitching with newly invented Chinese designs was most popular among American customers because “colour contrasts picturing figures, lanterns and pagodas” in vivid colours enticed the eye.³⁹⁶ In the port cities and metropolitan cities of the United States, Chinese cross-stitch was described by marketers using terms such as “handmade”, “pure bleach linen”, “colourful”, and “great value”³⁹⁷, and thus could be sold either mingled with other international textile products or in Oriental shops. As America’s “Oriental craze” declined in the 1920s, made-in-China goods gradually lost their association with exoticism.³⁹⁸ With lightly decorated Chinese-themed patterns, cross-stitch imports suited both as products sold in Oriental shops and commodities in department stores. One advertisement posted by an Oriental shop in New York, for example, highlighted a Beijing-made luncheon set made in polychrome cross-stitch, which included one scarf and six place plates. The accompanied illustration indicated a generic representation of China-made cross-stitch highlighting a simple, neat design, which constituted a common way to attract readers visually (figure 5.6).

³⁹⁶ Cunningham, “The Chinese Embroidery Industry,” 17. In comparison, motifs and designs originated in China in drawnwork and lace came into existence at a rather late time. One example is Wang Xuelin, “Yantai chousha huabian yanjiu” (Master’s Thesis, Shandong University of Art and Design, 2014), 37-38, which claims that Chinese designed drawnwork and lace in Yantai, Shandong were invented after the 1970s.

³⁹⁷ *Boston Daily Globe*, Apr 4, 1926, A 16.

³⁹⁸ The Oriental Craze swept America since the 1870s. As Hoganson explains, as imported products became mundane, made-in-China goods lost their connections to exotism at the turn of 1920. See Hoganson, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity,” 82–83.

Pekin Embroidered Linen

In this department will be found a very large assortment of beautiful sets and pieces for the table, all recent importations.

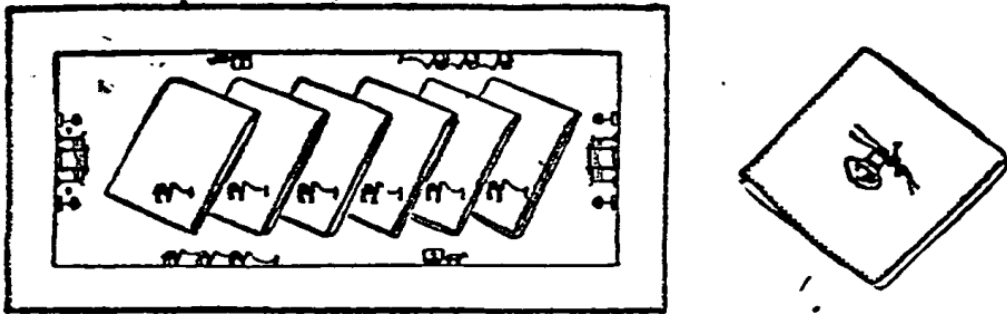


Figure 5.6 Advertisement illustration of China-made cross-stitch linen, in *New York Times*, Nov 14, 1924,

12.

In contrast, without connection to Americans, efforts made by Chinese local businessmen and embroiderers did not yield satisfaction. To alter the situation under which the cross-stitch business was fully controlled by foreigners and their compradors, Chinese embroiderers attempted to expand their influence to get a larger share. Their effort started as early as the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition when reports were submitted after careful investigation at the exposition. In Yang Zhuomao's 楊卓茂 report, he was fully aware of China's strength in cheap labor and techniques and its defect in the lack of available designs. He proposed to purchase products in America to be sent to China as samples.³⁹⁹ Unfortunately, this proposal did not materialize as American firms continued to dominate international trade. Alternatively, Chinese embroiderers attempted to detect the preferences of local foreigners and peddled finished handiwork. For example, one news article advised embroiderers to work with plain linen

³⁹⁹ "Xiang E fusai daibiao Yang Zhoumao diaocha cixiu huabian bianzhi deng pin baogaoshu," *Zhonghua quanguo shanghui lianhehui huibao* 1916 Vol. 3, No. 3: 1-3.

to cater to Western tastes, instead of coloured linen which was favored among the Chinese.⁴⁰⁰

However, design seemed to be a reoccurring issue. A 1924 article enumerated several successful and unsuccessful experiences of individual embroiderers peddling cross-stitch, in which case the tastes of the foreign consumers were described as unpredictable.⁴⁰¹

As such, compradors were most successful in the cross-stitch industry. The career of Canton-born male cross-stitch embroiderer Huang Xilong 黄锡隆 fully epitomized a successful comprador mediating between American customers and Chinese workers. Huang was one among many who sought opportunities in Beijing without any funds. He started his career as a contractor making cross-stitch embroidery for a middleman and soon began to communicate directly with foreign traders. As his wealth accumulated, Huang established his workshop instructing apprentices, who would receive raw materials from Huang to process at home. To further ensure the quality of the products, Huang dispatched paper stencils with colouring instructions to workers. As such, Huang supervised the essential aspects of the production, the quality of the material, and the designs.⁴⁰²

In comparison to Huang Xilong's story in north China, the career of comprador Huang Qiwen 黄起文 based in the south was similarly successful but through a different approach. Unlike Huang Xilong who attracted American dealers with his technical excellence, Huang Qiwen knew little about embroidery on the technical level and grounded his success on personal ties. Born in the port city Wenzhou, Huang was a pauper child who received his education from a missionary school. It was his connections to the American clergy and his language ability that offered him the opportunity to develop the cross-stitch business. In 1922 he launched Qiwen

⁴⁰⁰ Jiangxi chupin xiehui, "Gailiang xiabu fangfa," *Shiye qianshuo* 1919, No. 176: 2-3.

⁴⁰¹ "Xiangsheng tiaohuaye zhi dayouketu," *Shiye zazhi* 1924 No. 83: 5.

⁴⁰² "Beipingshi de tiaohua xiuhua ye," *Xinghua* Vol. 32, No. 28 (1935): 21.

Nü Gong She 綺文女紅社 (Qiwen Womanly-Work Company) dispatching cloth and thread to and collecting products from Wenzhou homestay embroiderers. His corporation was a paragon that supported local families.⁴⁰³ In addition, Huang Qiwen's success demonstrated the involvement of American missionaries in the cross-stitch business, which will be discussed below.

Missionary Cross-Stitch Sold in Shanghai

The putting-out system adopted by the export cross-stitch industry in China benefitted from its flexibility in organizing low-wage homestay workers. The downside, accordingly, was the lack of supervision, as some products failed to meet the export standards.⁴⁰⁴ As this difficulty was experienced by most cross-stitch businesses, one group of foreigners managed to overcome the loose organization and to work closely with the Chinese: American missionaries.⁴⁰⁵ American mission schools were closely associated with the rapid growth of decorative textile productions in port cities and were believed to be the origin of the industry in many regions in public memory.⁴⁰⁶ Because American missionaries were able to organize their students to work collectively and thus effectively deliver designated designs, they produced cross-stitch of the best quality.

⁴⁰³ Shen Jia, *Yitiaokaiwang zhongguo de chuan* (Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe, 2016), 278-82. Yu Xiong and Yu Guang, *Wenzhou gongye jianshi* (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue chubanshe, 1995), 33-34.

⁴⁰⁴ Cunningham, "The Chinese Embroidery Industry," 17.

⁴⁰⁵ There is rich literature on American missionary expansion in China. For example, see Fairbank, John K. ed. *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013.

⁴⁰⁶ In Shandong Yantai, the origin of the lace industry was attributed to a female teacher from the American Presbyterian church. Likewise, Drawnwork in Guangzhou Swatow was said to begin with American church work. See Peng Zeyi ed., *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao* Vol. 2, 408-11.

As previously noted, in Europe cross-stitch was traditionally regarded as an upper-class leisure activity.⁴⁰⁷ The cultivation of cross-stitch for women was, in large part, entangled with the creation of the girlhood sampler, which was imbued with cultural meanings of womanly skill, obedience, and good manners.⁴⁰⁸ Following European exploration of the New World, this practice was brought to America and continued to be an important aspect of girlhood education. During the early colonial years in the new continent, cross-stitch was taught at home, and later at private schools and finishing schools. While American middle and upper class girls were making samplers for refinement, outside the Western world textile education was introduced to poor children as a practical skill by mission and government schools.⁴⁰⁹ Because of the simplicity of the techniques, cross-stitch was welcomed by new learners.⁴¹⁰ Research suggests that the benefit generated by cross-stitch technology was multifold – other than pragmatic skills and Western-standard civil, domestic knowledge introduced to missionary pupils, it served as a monetary supplement funding the school.⁴¹¹

In many port cities in China, it is difficult to verify the names of Westerners who first mobilized locals to embroider, as individual cases differed from one another. Yet many case studies, memoirs, and archival files attribute the introduction of imported textile techniques to

⁴⁰⁷ For the example of one cross-stitch pattern book designed for female amateurs, see Johannes Schönsperger's book of 1523 in Anne Sebba, *Samplers: Five Centuries of a Gentle Craft* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 18.

⁴⁰⁸ Rozsika Park, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), 85-93.

⁴⁰⁹ In Great Britain, Sunday schools in the early nineteenth century instructed poor children in textile tasks to prepare them for domestic servant jobs. See Anne Sebba, *Samplers*, 114-116. The boarding schools for American indigenous children conducted textile tasks to financially support the school, a common practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Anderson, Lynne, "Samplers, Sewing and Star Quilts: Changing Federal Policies Impact Native American Education and Assimilation," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* (2012), 656. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/656>, 6-8.

⁴¹⁰ See Sebba, *Samplers*, 121.

⁴¹¹ While the economic value of textiles can be materialized in various ways, in her article, Strickrodt discusses missionary samplers that were used as propaganda for school fundraising in Africa. See Silke Strickrodt, "African Girls' Samplers from Mission Schools in Sierra Leone (1820s to 1840s)," *History in Africa* 2010, 37: 189-245.

mission schools in the locality.⁴¹² As elsewhere, mission schools in East Asia faced harsh conditions of insufficient funding, along with language barriers, health issues, and cultural conflicts. The skepticism of the locals toward Western intruders during the early days of colonization added another layer of hardship, which resulted in only the poorest children taking mission school as a last resort, and thus in many cases no tuition fees were collected from students.⁴¹³ It was thus crucial for the schools to maintain their financial self-sufficiency. Various practical skills were offered to mission pupils to bring in income, which went hand in hand with imbued values of cleanliness, discipline, and order. The craftwork often took a pragmatic market-oriented approach to select “low-cost” and “popular” items,⁴¹⁴ for which case small-scale, non-mechanical textile products were ideal for female students. Girls were also convinced that sewing, weaving, and stitching were “to offer a livelihood for the future” as well as an asset “when choosing a husband.”⁴¹⁵

Although reputable for quality, mission textiles were not usually found in department and retail stores in the United States. Many were sold in special charity events, or directly shipped to church-run gift shops in the USA, or through mail-order businesses.⁴¹⁶ Some textiles were consumed in China before they were shipped out. Foreign settlers in Shanghai, particularly, were known to patronize mission schools of inland China. As the 1926 *North China Daily News*

⁴¹² The main body of this literature is available in the Chinese language as Master’s thesis. For one case study, see mission lace in Shandong in Wang Xiaoting, “Zhongguo jindai jiaohui xuexiao yu nüzi gongyi jiaoyu yanjiu: Yi huabianye weili,” Master’s Thesis, Zhejiang University of Technology, 2017.

⁴¹³ Wang Lixin, *Meiguo chuanjiaoshi yu Zhongguo wanqing xiandaihua* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1997), 16.

⁴¹⁴ The original text reads “本輕”，“易受外界歡迎。” In Lai Yiting, “Jiaohui gongyi zhi gaikuang 教會工藝之概況 (1916),” in Li Chucai ed, *Diguo zhuyi qinhua jiaoyushi ziliao: Jiaohui jiaoyu* (Beijing: Jiaoyu kexue chubanshe, 1987), 294. Other than cross-stitch, other decorative textiles were also offered by churches. For one example of a missionary-run lace school, see Ma Fujia, “Zili jiaohui chang gongyi,” *Xinghua* 1920 Vol. 17, No. 18: 15-16.

⁴¹⁵ The original text reads “以為後日度生之計。” In “Chuangshe nüxue lun 創設女學論 (1886),” in Li Chucai ed, *Diguo zhuyi qinhua jiaoyushi ziliao: Jiaohui jiaoyu*, 248. “擇婿之時有較好之機會,” in “Jidujiao nüzi jiaoyu de qiyuan zuoyong,” in Li Chucai ed, *Diguo zhuyi qinhua jiaoyushi ziliao: Jiaohui jiaoyu*, 241.

⁴¹⁶ Cunningham, “The Chinese Embroidery Industry,” 17.

reported, “there can be few women in Shanghai who are unattracted by the delightful cross-stitch that can be acquired in this part of the world.”⁴¹⁷

Missionary workers in Shanghai supported local missions by earning profits from cross-stitch sale events. One of the frequently highlighted locations was the Baptist Mission Compound at 178 North Szechuen Road, home to Mr. Frank Rawlinson and his wife Florence B. Lang. Rawlinson was born in England in 1871 and immigrated to the United States in his youth. As an active Baptist, he was sent to Shanghai in 1902, where he served in Protestant Christian work and later as an editor for the renowned missionary magazine *Chinese Recorder*. Lang married Rawlinson in 1917, and it was through her husband’s connections in churches that she gathered missionary textile works from across China, such as reputable products from Shantou and Anqing 安慶, to sell in Shanghai.⁴¹⁸ In the early 1920s Ms. Rawlinson’s name frequently appeared in short news advertising her sales events.

Another popular, and perhaps more established cross-stitch shop was the Industrial Missions Center located at 114 Dixwell Road (address number changed to 713 Dixwell Road in 1924, and then moved to 46 Peking Road in 1926).⁴¹⁹ Like the Rawlinsons, the shop collected decorative textile works from missions across China to financially assist religious families. Cross-stitch was a featured work in the center for its durability, the coarseness associated with

⁴¹⁷ “The Fascination of Cross-Stitch,” *The North-China Daily News*, July 8, 1926. For one early example of the sale event see “News from Europe,” *The North-China Daily News*, Aug 6, 1903. The exhibition of embroideries by Ningpo Technical Schools (of embroidery and silk weaving) was held at Norfolk House, St James’s Square in London. The school was established by missionaries twelve years ago for local women to reproduce old French, Spanish and Portuguese embroideries.

⁴¹⁸ “Frank Joseph Rawlinson,” *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, Oct 20, 1937. “Frank Joseph Rawlinson,” in *Dictionary of American Biography*, edited by American Council of Learned Societies. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944. “From Day to Day,” *The North-China Daily News*, Oct 10, 1921, “From Day to Day,” *The North-China Daily News*, Jun 6, 1921 and “News Brevities,” *The China Press*, Jun 23, 1922. link.gale.com/apps/doc/BT2310005020/BIC?u=umuser&sid=BIC&xid=28d3be99. Accessed 20 Dec. 2020.

⁴¹⁹ In most primary sources the center’s name appears as “Industrial Missions Center”, although sometimes the center is referred to as “Industrial Mission Center”. The two names were used interchangeably, even by the center itself which released advertisements with different names in newspapers.

indigenous imagination, and its feasibility as home décor. The products were of high quality and supplied by items from local missionaries especially from several popular locales, such as coloured cross-stitch from Anqing and blue-and-white works from Yichang. The shop opened on Tuesday and Friday mornings as well as by appointment. The Industrial Mission Center was a reliable resource for settlers' home decoration selections including tablecloths, breakfast and luncheon sets, napkins, and runners. Sales and seasonal supplies delighted holiday shoppers looking for items for their own use, or as gifts for friends and family, often overseas.⁴²⁰ In 1925 the business expanded, and a new branch shop was established at 13 North Szechuen Road.⁴²¹ The products were with reasonable prices that were usually only half the price of similar items sold in the States (see the table below for prices of sample items).

Item	Price	Store/Company	Ad published on	Date	Place
Tea sets (cloth and 6 napkins)	\$12.75	Madiera Linen Shop	New York Times	1923-11-18	New York
Luncheon set (a large scarf and 6 place plates)	\$10.00	The House of the Orient	New York Times	1924-11-14	New York
Napkin	\$1.50	The House of the Orient	New York Times	1924-11-14	New York
Luncheon set	\$12.00	The House of the Orient	New York Times	1924-12-14	New York
Lunch set	\$11.50-16.50	C. F. Hovey Co.	The Boston Globe	1926-04-04	Boston
Oblong set (7 pcs or 13 pcs)	\$10.5/\$16.50	C. F. Hovey Co.	The Boston Globe	1926-04-04	Boston
Oblong	75c-\$1.29	C. F. Hovey Co.	The Boston Globe	1926-04-04	Boston
Scarf	\$4.39	C. F. Hovey Co.	The Boston Globe	1926-04-04	Boston
Tea and luncheon set	\$3.50-6.00	One Price Lace Co. 一价花边公司	The China Press	1925-01-18	Shanghai
Luncheon set (6 mats and a centerpiece)	\$4.90	Industrial Missions Center	The Shanghai Sunday Times	1927-07-31	Shanghai

⁴²⁰ The Center frequently published advertisements on *The China Press* between 1925 and 1928. For two detailed articles reporting on the center, see "For the Lover of the Unique," *The Shanghai Sunday Times*, July 31, 1927 and "The Fascination of Cross-Stitch," *The North-China Daily News*, July 8, 1926.

⁴²¹ "Cross-Stitch Center," *The North-China Daily News*, April 2, 1925.

Up to this point, it may be reasonable to ask if the birth of the pattern book discussed at the beginning of this chapter had any connection with Shanghai's open environment hosting fashion events for international communities. Unfortunately, due to the scarcity of primary sources, the actual impact of missionary cross-stitch on the Chinese market is difficult to evaluate. Although made in China by the Chinese, missionary cross-stitch targeted American customers without entering the Chinese domestic market. It is reasonable to believe that the textile products hardly had any direct impact on Chinese fashion as the only Chinese group that handled cross-stitch household fabrics were rural women workers. The influence of missionary textile works was likely to be an indirect one with limited capability. The arrival of Western-style cross-stitch in Shanghai's fashion circles in the 1920s and 1930s was thus through a different route – introduced by urban women magazine editors who were inspired by Western fashion magazines and albums, which will be discussed later.

If the industry of missionary cross-stitch has revealed any historical significance in China's fashion circle, it perhaps provided a successful business model that effectively delivered the design to embroiderers. It was via direct supervision that embroiderers received proper designs before stitching. In contrast, cross-stitch businesses that relied on the putting-out system suffered from inconsistent quality. This was a dilemma later faced by young girls in China when they picked up needles to catch up with this fashionable handiwork. Although the techniques of stitching were easily apprehended, they found themselves restrained by having few patterns to follow. Similar to other embroidery genres, designing and patterning still relied on professionals and constituted the main barrier of the technology. As the following discussion will demonstrate, this disconnect was solved by the publication of pattern books and their gradual availability in cities.

Catching up with Fashion

In comparison with complicated variations and combinations of multiple stitches adopted by traditional boudoir and commercial embroidery, cross-stitch is technically easy to implement because the entire piece is finished with the repeated movement of making cross patterns on the fabric. Furthermore, as stitching with and on cotton is more manageable than smooth silk, cross-stitch embroidery is a technology that can be self-taught. Because of its technical accessibility, cross-stitch should have gained a wide acceptance by amateur female learners, yet the adoption of cross-stitch by common families did not happen overnight. For several years after its introduction by female magazines, the medium communicated between the imagined pattern and the implementation of stitch was void. This predicament was new to China where the gap between imagination and implementation was traditionally bridged by professional artists in the case of workshops, or by arts education in the case of boudoir ladies. In the case of cross-stitch transplanted from Western culture, the absence of available patterns was a twofold problem – modern, chic patterns were difficult to create, and women had limited access to those that did exist.

An early attempt at popularizing cross-stitch was carried out by a 1922 article “*Tiaohua shu*” 挑花術 (The Techniques of Cross-stitch) written by Zhang Yunqiu 張韻秋.⁴²² While acknowledging that stitching crosses was easy, Zhang pointed out the obstacles – cross-stitch had few “variations” in patterns and transferring patterns onto the fabric was “difficult.”⁴²³ Because of no available designs for amateur embroiderers, Zhang encouraged her readers to create their own workable patterns. Zhang’s method referred to a two-step drawing activity which

⁴²² Zhang Yunqiu, “Tiaohua shu,” *Funiü zazhi (Shanghai)* Vol. 8, No. 2 (1922): 64-67.

⁴²³ Zhang Yunqiu, “Tiaohua shu,” 64-66.

strategically relied on implementing grid paper. According to Zhang, the first step was to draw the chosen image onto grid paper, and then the image should be edited to fit the grid on the second piece of paper (figure 5.7). As the base fabric (cotton or linen) displayed a visible layout of grid created by warp and weft, it was convenient for embroiderers to make crosses by counting the tiny squares and observing the relations between stitches.

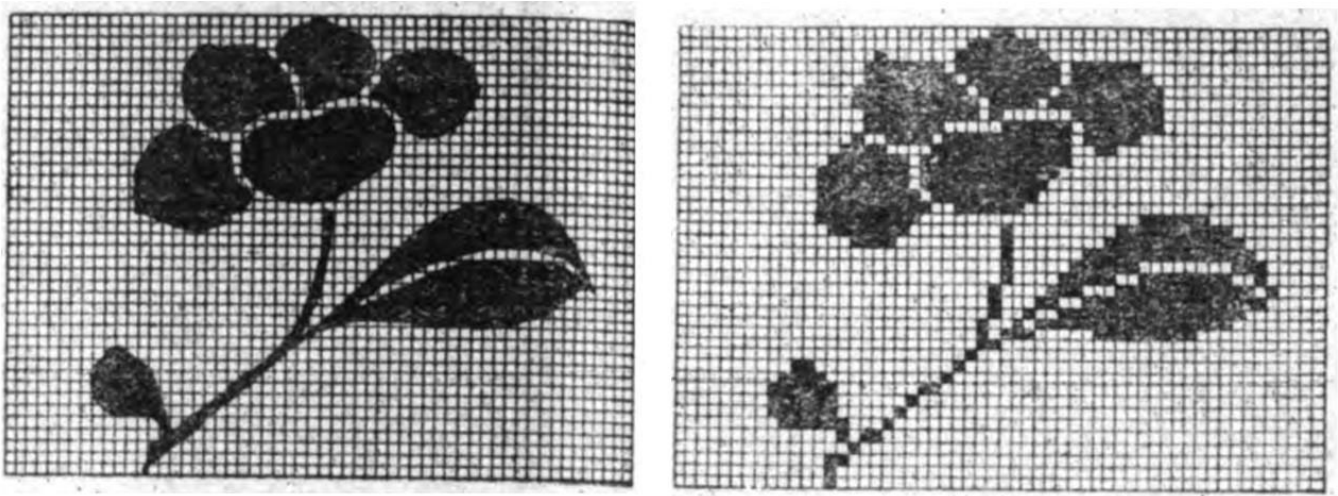


Figure 5.7 The two-step patterning method demonstrated by Zhang Yunqiu. Zhang Yunqiu, “Tiaohua shu,” *Funü zazhi* (Shanghai) Vol. 8, No. 2 (1922): 65.

Zhang Yunqiu’s DIY approach reflected the problem that the scarcity of ready-to-use patterns impeded the popularity of cross-stitch. Female magazines and pictorials in the 1920s were the principal contributors introducing overseas cross-stitch patterns, such as the pictorials *Shijie huabao* 世界畫報 and *San liu jiu huabao* 三六九畫報 and the magazine *Funü shenghuo* 婦女生活.⁴²⁴ Unfortunately, these designs were incoherently introduced, covering a broad range of random themes, and with no further explanation of the artwork or how to employ it. Figure 5.8 demonstrates a typical problematic design with no pragmatic use. The image itself is drawn in

⁴²⁴ Examples see *Shijie huabao* 1924 No. 46: 53-56 and *Shijie huabao* 1925 No. 49: 32.

different levels of shade to distinguish objects from near and far. However, no instructions are provided to explain how to delineate these details with threads. This design takes a single page of the magazine with no additional information attached other than the date of creation that is indicated at the bottom of the image. It fails in communicating with its readers.

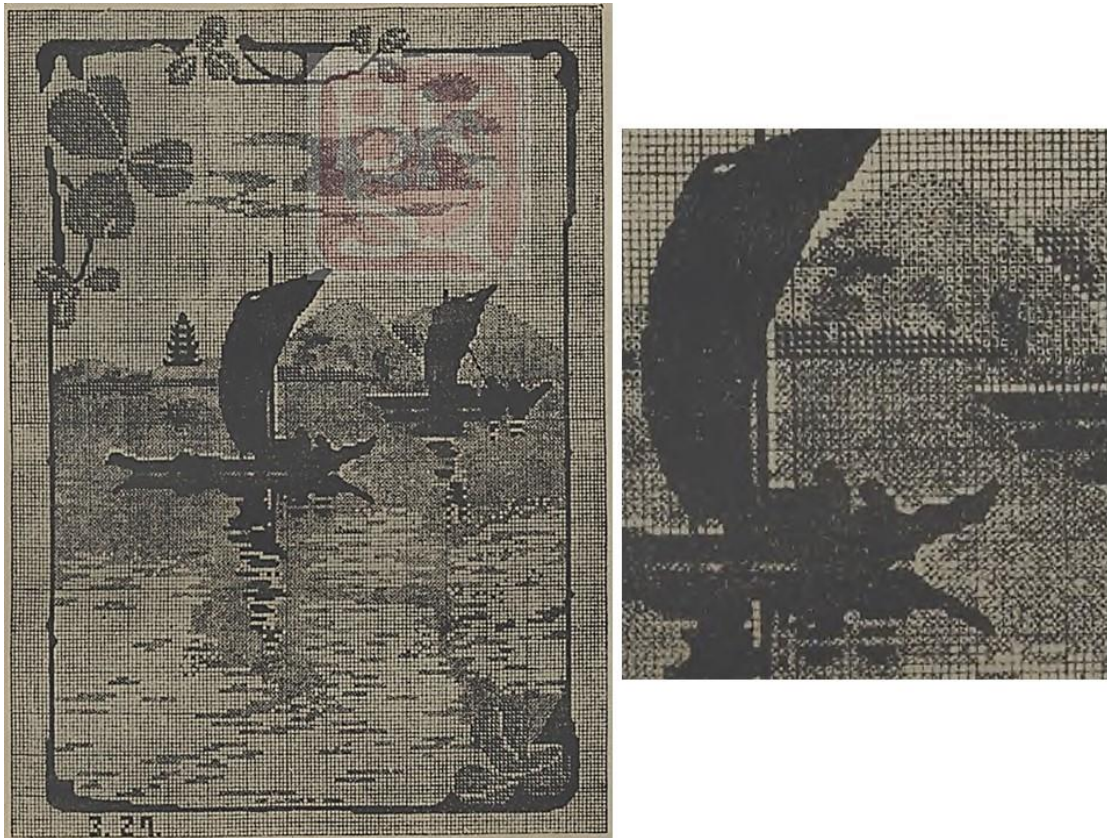


Figure 5.8 Left: cross-stitch pattern in *Shijie huabao* 1924 No. 46: 54. Note that the red watermark at the top right corner is not included in the original image. Right: partial details of the image.

The knowledge deficiency toward cross-stitch was acknowledged by the editorial team of *Nü pengyou* 女朋友 (Female Friend), the Shanghai female pictorial that published a series of cross-stitch patterns on more than ten consecutive issues.⁴²⁵ The editors indicated that they

⁴²⁵ *Nü pengyou* shortly lived for two years from 1932 to 1933, chiefly edited by Hukao 胡考.

obtained designs from European and American art collections as a “lexicon” to help their readers aesthetically in improving their indoor environment.⁴²⁶ However, the application of the design was never taught – the editors admitted that “in terms of colours, forgive me to be a layperson, so girl friends please choose as you wish!”⁴²⁷ Because of limited experience in cross-stitch techniques, the editors defined themselves as aesthetic guides with the mission of nourishing their readers with “a heart that loves beauty.”⁴²⁸ Poetic language that emphasizes on “*meili*” 美麗 (beautiful) and “*yishu*” 藝術 (artistic) values is seen throughout the issues. As such, instructive designs were scarce for amateur cross-stitch embroiderers in Republican China. Diaries and letters suggest that good patterns were difficult to obtain, especially for those who resided far from modern cities.⁴²⁹

In comparison with the less-successful examples discussed above, Shanghai-based company Mei Hwa Art Embroidering Company established a convenient selling network spreading its influence to distant areas of China. With the first volume released in August 1927 and the last publication in 1937, Mei Hwa introduced approximately seventy issues of cross-stitch pattern books within ten years before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War.⁴³⁰ Since the first volume, a wide-spread selling network was established with more than ten retailers in local department stores and bookstores in Shanghai and more than forty retailers in other major cities,

⁴²⁶ “Shizibu tu’anhua,” *Nü pengyou* Vol. 1, No. 16 (1932): 19; “Shizibu tu’anhua,” *Nü pengyou* Vol. 1, No. 18 (1932): 19.

⁴²⁷ “至於顏色恕我是個門外漢，請女朋友們自己去選擇吧！” In “Shizibu tuhua’an,” *Nü pengyou* Vol. 1, No. 29 (1932): 19.

⁴²⁸ The original text is “愛美心,” in “Shizibu tu’anhua,” *Nü pengyou* Vol. 1, No. 27 (1932): 19.

⁴²⁹ Republican intellectual Xu Zhaowei purchased cross-stitch pattern books for his granddaughter when he traveled to Shanghai. See Xu Zhaowei, *Xu Zhaowei riji*, punctuated by Li Xiangdong, Bao Qifeng, Su Xing, volume 4 (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2013), 2534. In a letter sent to her urban cousin, a rural girl complained about having no cross-stitch pattern books and asked for some. Hu Pengfei ed, *Xiegei haizi de minsuo shuxin: Qinqile* (Beijing: Zhaohua chubanshe, 2016), 20-21.

⁴³⁰ The last available issue online was the 68th volume, published in 1937.

namely Beijing, Tianjin, Wuhan, Shenyang, Chongqing, Changsha, and Hongkong. The next year a few more retailers joined from more diverse cities, such as small cities like Qingdao and Shantou, and overseas, Singapore. By 1937, before the series discontinued its publication, Mei Hwa had more than one hundred retailers outside Shanghai.

Mei Hwa's design philosophy was dominated by a hybrid approach reflecting the most recent Chinese and Western popular culture. The patterns were designed for specific items with particular shapes such as pillowcases, shoes, and bibs and as universal decorations that suited all textiles to maintain flexibility. Mei Hwa hired the same specialists to maintain the continued designing philosophy from the beginning to the end – synthesizing a broad range of mixed Chinese and Western popular motifs: auspicious objects continued with traditional designs, floral decorations inherited both Chinese and Western aesthetics, and landscapes that depicted famous sites. Less common designs were also included, for instance, planes and steamboats were perhaps for boy's clothing. A frequent design comprises the embellishment of words in an artistic font. Except for auspicious Chinese phrases, patriotic and civil modern slogans – “*ziyou*” 自由 (liberty), “*wenming*” 文明 (civilization), and “*shixue guochi*” 誓雪國恥 (vowing to reprieve the shame of our country) – added to the shared contemporary value.⁴³¹ English letters were usually in wishful tones, such as “good morning” and “we wish you joy” (figure 5.9).

⁴³¹ Patriotic patterns are adopted universally on textiles, especially during wars and crises. For one example, see oak-leaf patterns as a British patriotic motif during the period of Napoleonic warfare. Hilary Davidson, “Reconstructing Jane Austen's Silk Pelisse, 1812–1814,” *Costume* 2015, 49:2, 206.

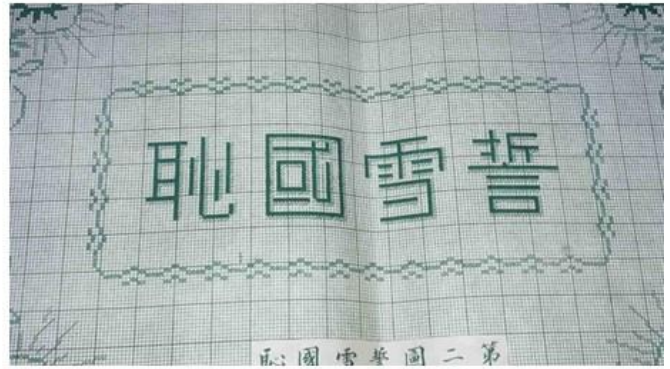


Figure 5.9 Upper left: patterns with characters “ziyou”, “wenming”, “ruyi”, and “jixiang”, in *Shanghai Meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 2 (1927). Upper right: patterns with characters “shixue guochi”, in *Shanghai Meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 13 (1930). Bottom: patterns with English phrases “good morning” and “we wish you joy” and modern transportation tools, in *Shanghai Meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 10 (1929). Source: www.kongfz.com

Mei Hwa's success was inseparable from its instructive, pragmatic nature. Its patterns were printed in colour and with the indication of specific stitches for a convenient application. As figure 5.10 demonstrates, the book clearly indicates the exact locations for stitching small crosses on the fabric to form the pattern. Strong lines can be created by thick threads, while dots can be done in seed stitch. The colour choice is suggested by the book, and bold lines are added to the grid for the convenience of users. In short, Mei Hwa's pattern books were excellent guides for amateur embroiderers that were incomparable to the earlier-introduced patterns. In this way, Mei Hwa constituted an instructor who made the current fashion available to any student. The deciphering of Western words and Chinese characters into delightful decoration transferred literacy into popular art that, even for women who did not read, offered a window on modernity.

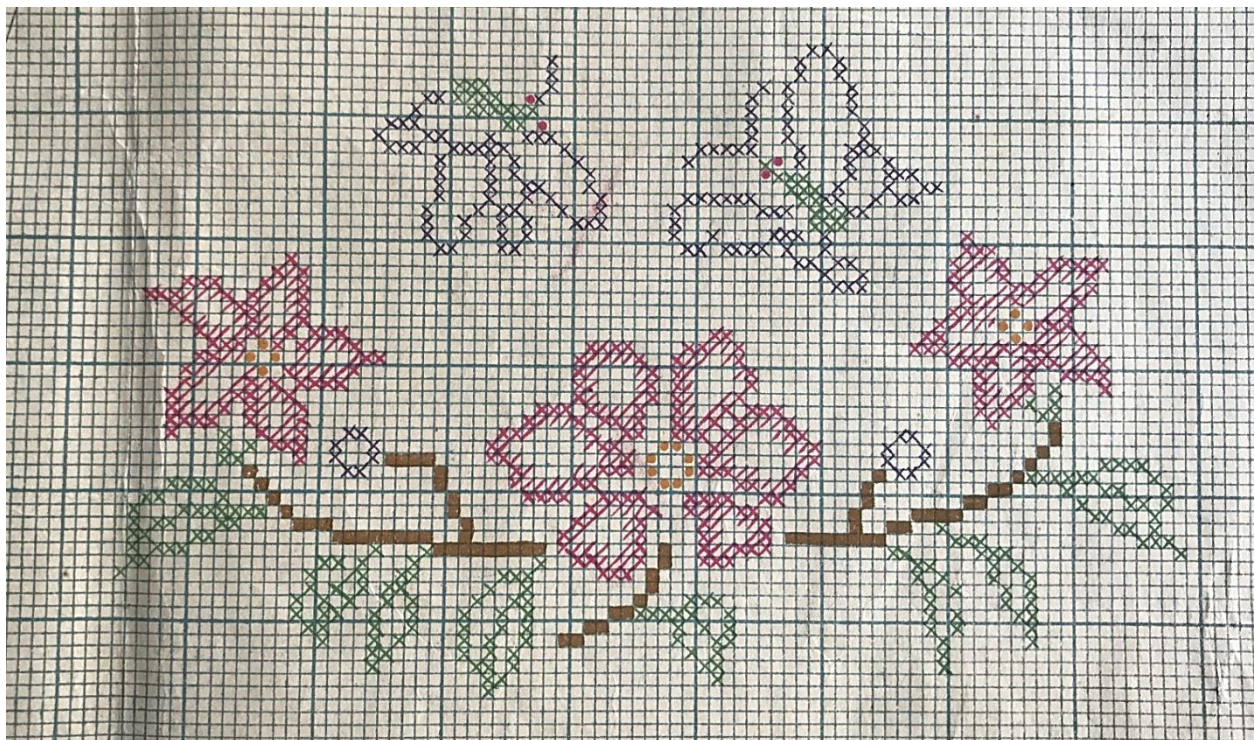


Figure 5.10 Floral cross-stitch pattern (partial), *Shanghai Meihua shizi tiaoxiu tu* No. 6 (1927): 6.

Photographed by the author. Personal collection of the author.

Alongside the decorative patterns that Mei Hwa delivered to its users, the book series also served as a means of knowledge dissemination. Its readers were expected to be young, chic girls, who were willing to embroider English letters and Western motifs to decorate their personal and household items. A recurring pattern in the series of Mei Hwa was the design of pillowcases for modern-style bedding. Unlike a traditional Chinese pillow that is commonly in a cylinder or cubic shape, with two ends embroidered, the surface of a flat pillow served as an ornamental entity for embellishment in the new style, which indicated the modern sense of its owner. Images that presented foreign items and lifestyles and words that denoted cultivation brought a sense of participation in up-to-date modernity. Textiles, as an unconventional medium for knowledge dissemination, have drawn attention from several scholars, as texts and images can be created with a great extent of fluidity and flexibility on fabrics – they can be written, woven, embroidered, and printed onto fabric, or exist in mixed forms.⁴³² As such, textiles are a perfect medium for people outside elite circles to view or create unfamiliar information just by following available patterns to be a part of the “global imaginary” community.⁴³³ What Mei Hwa offered to early twentieth century girls in China, educated or uneducated, was a bigger world beyond their routine life.

Mei Hwa established its reputation as a commerce complex selling a variety of textile-related products. Except for pattern books, linen and cotton fabrics and threads were available via mail order for the convenience of readers. In addition, ready-made embroideries could be purchased for those who did not care for making by themselves, as advertised on the title page.

⁴³² In the less studied area of Chinese textiles, for an excellent study on knowledge transmission from Chinese elites to peasants through textiles patterned by woodblocks, see Catherine Pagani, “From Woodblock to Textile: Imagery of Elite Culture in the Blue-and-White Embroideries of Sichuan,” *Canadian Art Review* 1997, Vol. 24, No. 1, 28-41.

⁴³³ The concept of “global imaginary” is coined by Manfred Steger to refer to a sense of belonging to a global community, developed from Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”. See Manfred Steger, *The Rise of the Global Imaginary: Political Ideologies from the French Revolution to the Global War on Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University, 2008.

This material availability supported cross-stitch to be spread to an audience broader than in the early 1920s when it was first introduced outside industrial circles. It is difficult to estimate even a rough number of females who practiced cross-stitch, yet the competition between domestic and imported products suggests a profitable market in homemade cross-stitch.⁴³⁴ The French fashion brand D.M.C. entered the Chinese market challenging Mei Hwa with a similar concept advertising a variety of materials including cloth, threads, and pattern books, as well as finished accessory items.⁴³⁵

Conclusion

The mass-produced polychrome cross-stitch in China around the 1920s was consumed by American middle-class women, produced by Chinese peasant workers, and then later adopted by young Chinese girls. It generated a dialogue connecting different groups, and it shaped each group significantly. American women were privileged by low-priced, ready-to-use household décor thanks to the country's economic power, while Chinese girls either benefitted economically or emulated America's cultural advancement. In Gell's terms, the history of cross-stitch represents how technical excellence fits the environment in which it situates. For cross-stitch that was practiced by Chinese young girls, the technical excellence was drawn from the cultural appeal of American décor which signified civilization and modernity. Yet the American standard could not be formed without cultural elements taken from Asia. Cross-stitch presents an exemplar of purveyors of information that went beyond region, language, and culture.

⁴³⁴ Registration records show a growing number of domestic brands. One example is “A 字” cross-stitch threads, registered in 1928. See “Shending shangbiao di qiwuba hao,” *Shangbiao gongbao* 1928 No. 9, 132.

⁴³⁵ “*Diemeixian tuoxie tese*.” *Shibao*, May 24, 1934. D.M.C. is translated into *diemeixian* 蝶美線.

The history of cross-stitch also reveals the fluidity of the notion of modernity. What it meant to be modern was subject to the advancements of culture and technology and spoke to specific groups. American women enjoyed the modernity of cosmopolitanism whereas their Chinese counterparts were attracted by American cultural advancement, ignoring the fact that this technology was first practiced by Chinese rural women. Within China, modernity was likewise not the same notion shared by different groups. Chapter Four discussed school education that attempted to cultivate embroidery artists who presented independent, all-around modern women. In this chapter, it was the sense of globalization that encouraged city girls to teach themselves to catch up with a fashionable, modern world.

Chapter Six

Papercuts and Peasant Embroidery

An Embroidery in Progress

An embroidery kept at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (hereafter MIA) is a rare piece of work in progress (figure 6.1). A black rectangle of cotton cloth is loosely sewn onto a larger piece of turquoise cloth, the cotton stitching is unrefined, the edges of the fabrics are rough, and a papercut stencil is loosely sewn onto the black cloth. The appearance of a stencil in this example, alongside the relatively inexpensive materials, is of particular interest to this study since it suggests that anyone, regardless of social class, could reproduce fine embroidery patterns without the assistance of professional artists. This chapter will demonstrate that papercuts such



Figure 6.1 Embroidery pattern at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (accession No. 2004.67.549). Source: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/94658/embroidery-pattern-miao>

as this had the greatest impact on the popularization of embroidery, since they eliminated the need to design, draw, or copy the pattern in the early twentieth-century China.

This MIA papercut is a good example of how papercut helped convey information between distinct social and culture groups across class, culture, and ethnicity. The visual representation of the papercut stands as a reinterpretation of Qing official badges (figure 6.2). Most distinguishable is the semi-circle shaped pattern below the fish, which is comparable to the “wave pattern” on badges popularized since the mid-Qing. In addition, the flowers and vines



Figure 6.2 A typical rank badge (for the wife of a seventh rank civil official) that dates to the late eighteenth century: an animal processes the center, wave patterns are located at the bottom, and the background is decorated with auspicious items such as peonies, the pine tree, and bats. Collection of the Royal Ontario Museum (accession No. 950.100.171.A-C). Source: <https://collections.rom.on.ca/objects/373420>

decorating the spare space are common items that embellish a rank badge. Lastly, the fish replaces a bird/beast to be the central icon, likely taking the auspicious meaning of the fish – *yu*, surplus – signifying the hope for an affluent life. The popular use of modified official badges was not uncommon among the Qing non-elites. The middle and lower classes wore badges adapted from official rank badges for important occasions and festivals. The MIA piece, moreover, is identified as a Miao item.⁴³⁶ Though the Miao people are culturally distinct from the Han majority, and typically embroidered geometric patterns using cross-stitch techniques and cotton thread, this MIA piece demonstrates how the visual representation of the elite Han Confucian bureaucracy could reach even a culturally and ethnically distinct community far from the political center, in part through the influence of papercut.

This MIA piece also reveals the flexibility and capacity for reinterpretation that is possible when papercuts are used as a medium to transfer information. As an unfinished piece, it allows one to observe the work in progress. For example, although the leaf near the center of the embroidery is carefully cut and displays fine detail, the embroiderer ignored those details and stitched over the entire piece. In contrast, the adjacent flower petals reflect the embroiderer's careful choice of threads to achieve colour gradation, which is not explicitly suggested by the papercut (figure 6.3). As such, the MIA piece offers insights into why there are so many thematically similar, yet aesthetically distinct items found in museums and private collections. Even though they follow an established pattern, these homemade embroideries are more personalized than workshop-produced items such as the sleeve bands and cloud collars mentioned in previous chapters.

⁴³⁶ <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/94658/embroidery-pattern-miao>. Accessed on Jan 18, 2023.



Figure 6.3 Embroidery pattern at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (partial, accession No. 2004.67.549).

Source: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/94658/embroidery-pattern-miao>

As the last chapter of the dissertation, my study has reached its chronological endpoint in the early twentieth century. In a temporal sense, made-for-embroidery papercuts exist alongside lifelike embroidery and cross-stitch that were discussed previously, although unlike the others, papercuts remained popular in rural areas into the latter half of the century. By tracing the production, distribution, and application of papercuts, and especially by analyzing Tianjin Jinbao Zhai 進寶齋 (Jinbao Studio), an exemplary workshop during the golden age of papercuts, this chapter will ask what contributed to the prolonged popularity of papercuts. This chapter reveals how papercuts were created by professionals, how they were circulated, and the creative ways in which they were adopted by embroiderers, especially peasant women. This chapter will argue that mass-produced papercuts played a significant role in popularizing embroidery as an almost infinitely reproducible medium that eliminated the technical difficulty of underdrawing.

Meanwhile, papercut patterns translated sophisticated literary knowledge and cultural values into

visual forms as popular motifs and layouts that supported women, especially peasants, in their pursuit of ability and reputation.

Paper: Not for Writing

When paper is cut into patterns, it invokes two forms of visibility: images and words. The creation of the two both required cultivation traditionally reserved for the elites, either the ability to draw or write. To a certain extent, papercuts granted uneducated people access to these forms of “high culture” as well as the freedom of employing and altering them. This freedom, however, was problematic, especially when papercuts with characters and phrases appeared at inappropriate places. The following section will trace how papercuts became a commercial product that transformed words into decoration, despite the discouragement from the elites.

The origin of papercuts is difficult to trace due to their ephemeral quality. The earliest extant papercuts date to five roundels excavated in Xinjiang that were created in the Northern and Southern dynasties.⁴³⁷ Cutting paper, however, was unlikely to have been a popular practice due to the limited production of paper in early China. The Song dynasty, with its dynamic markets and handicraft industries, might have been a booming age for the commercial production of papercuts, as suggested by Zhou Mi’s 周密 thirteenth-century essay collection, which recalls the superb skills of papercut craftsmen active in Bianliang 汴梁, the capital of the former Northern Song. The text reads:

Along the street of the old celestial capital, there was a craftsman who made various intricate papercuts as he wished. Moreover, Yu Jingzhi, located in the market of Zhong Wa, always cut calligraphy according to each artist’s handwriting style. Later on, there

⁴³⁷ Chen Jing, “Xinjiang chutu gu jianzhi yanjiu,” *Xinjiang shehui kexue* 1984 (04): 116-17.

suddenly rose a young man who was able to cut characters and flowers in his sleeves.

(Because he was) more skillful than (the previous) two men, he received all praises of the time. This (activity) is never seen any more.⁴³⁸

The Zhou Mi text, however, describes papercut as an art form in its own right. And while it is quite likely that women had begun to combine their skills as embroiderers and paper cutters from much earlier times, incontrovertible evidence of the practice did not appear until 1874, when an example was found in the *Jijin Zhai xiupu* 吉金齋繡譜 collection.⁴³⁹ This set of papercuts had been created by a woman amateur embroiderer and was discovered years after she passed away. The collection reflected her cultural background with patterns themed in highly personalized images such as court ladies and the scenes of reading and bathing babies.⁴⁴⁰

The survival of *Jijin Zhai xiupu* suggests that the use of paper stencils for embroidery was common among home-based embroiderers in the late nineteenth century. However, in the early twentieth century men began to make papercuts professionally and established their permanent workshops. The popularization of embroidery papercut stencils responded to a growing number of homebased embroiderers who sometimes self-produced papercuts. Meanwhile, the availability of stencils on the markets encouraged more women to take up this handiwork.

The surviving commercially made patterns suggest a different approach highlighting generic designs and popular themes. Taking the collection of Jinbao Zhai, a Tianjin papercut

⁴³⁸ “向舊天都街，有剪諸色花樣者極精妙，隨所欲而成。又中瓦有俞敬之者，每剪諸家書字皆專門。其後，忽有少年能于袖中剪字及花朵之類，更精于二人，於是獨擅一時之譽，今亦不復有此矣。” Zhou Mi, *Zhiyangtang zachao*, In *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu: zibu* Vol. 101 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1995), 375. Nancy Berliner also notes the selling of papercuts in the Song dynasty. See Nancy Zeng Berliner, *Chinese Folk Art: The Small Skills of Carving Insects* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986,) 105.

⁴³⁹ Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo minjian jianzhi yishu shihua* (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2007), 50-51.

⁴⁴⁰ Wang, *Zhongguo minjian jianzhi yishu shihua*, 50-51.

workshop, as an example, most patterns were auspicious and decorative flowers, plants, and animals that could be used for a wide range of applications on clothes and accessories.⁴⁴¹ In addition, papercuts referenced popular culture and legends, such as *Liu Hai xi jinchan* 劉海戲金蟾 – about a boy, Liu Hai, and a ‘gold toad’ (*jin chan*). As a homophone, the image suggested the auspicious phrase ‘(spread) money around’ (*jin chan*), and it was commonly used to decorate purses (figure 6.4).⁴⁴² From amateur creation to commercial products, the papercut brought more participants into its life trajectory. The following section will focus on Republican professional papercut makers, who created diverse distribution routes for the circulation of a universal embroidery text.

To a certain extent, in pre-modern China there was tension between the literate and illiterate over the proper use of two related domains that intersected at papercut crafts – words and paper. As modern scholarship suggests, the combination of words and paper were seen widely outside the literati circle, such as *nianhua* 年畫, New Year prints used to decorate walls and doors at ordinary homes.⁴⁴³ Yet the elites tended to guard their monopoly on these cultural

⁴⁴¹ Feng Jicai ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang: Jinbao zhai Yin Deyuan jianzhi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009).

⁴⁴² The pattern *Liu Hai xi jinchan* (Liu Hai teases the golden toad) depicts a playful scene of young man Liu Hai and a golden toad. It has renditions in various forms of folk art such as woodblock prints and ceramics; it is associated with several folk tales.

⁴⁴³ Note that the term “New Year prints” is not accepted by all scholars. Ellen Laing argues that “popular prints” is a more appropriate name as these prints were used for more than New Year celebrations. Nonetheless, the term *nianhua* is universally adopted in China. For further readings on *nianhua*, see Laing, Ellen Johnston, *Art and Aesthetics in Chinese Popular Prints: Selections from the Muban Foundation Collection*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002 and James Flath, *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004.



Figure 6.4 An example of the *Liu Hai xi jinchan* pattern for purses, in Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 227.

symbols to counteract the increasing abuse of them by illiterates. In the case of late Qing Xizi Hui 惜字會 (Word Cherishing Societies), written characters had a near-sacred quality, and certain local organizations were known to collect inscribed paper and burn it in specially made furnaces to show respect for literature. In addition, inappropriate use of written words on places such as windows, product packages, umbrellas and shoes was prohibited.⁴⁴⁴ The usage of paper by the lower class, even without words, was also seen as problematic in the eyes of the educated ones. Jacob Eyferth points out that “superstition paper” (ceremonial paper money) was still being condemned as late as the Republican era, when intellectuals continued to insist on the proper use

⁴⁴⁴ See Angela Ki Che Leung, “Qingdai de Xizi Hui,” *Xin Shixue* 1994 Vol. 5, No. 2, 83-115.

of paper for high cultural purposes. Paper made for ancestral sacrifices was considered improper and wasteful.⁴⁴⁵

Whereas inscribed paper was ideally reserved for proper uses defined by intellectuals themselves, the status of the papercut was more ambiguous as sometimes it outlined characters or phrases, and sometimes not. When Qing scholars noticed the prevalence of decorating commercial products with inscribed paper, they suggested that paper with cut-out imagery would be more appropriate for such purpose.⁴⁴⁶ Yet in the cases when papercuts outlined words and phrases to embellish daily, personal items, they were condemned. An 1868 newspaper article, for example, observed that: “in the past, embroidered verse on purses and fan cases were disrespectful. Recently, shameless embroidery shop owners even stitch verse onto belly bands and handkerchiefs.”⁴⁴⁷ However, despite elite concerns about the popular use of paper, embroidery-purposed papercuts were a growing business in the following years. As papercuts freely adopted words and images in combination, the demarcation between proper and improper use of paper became blurred. Moreover, paper was being used to accelerate the application of written words on fabric that adorned all possible items and body parts. This chapter will discuss how, when the elite knowledge of literature was mass-produced via the technology of papercutting, it was transferred into a form of decoration and blended with popular values and beliefs.

⁴⁴⁵ For the condemnation on superstition paper production in the 1930s, see Jacob Eyferth, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920-2000* (Boston: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), 109-11. Note that Eyferth’s discussion involves a 1935 Sichuan article. However, labeling ceremonial paper as “superstitious” was possibly influenced by the Anti-Superstition Campaign when the Lower Yangtze provinces were particularly targeted in the late 1920s. See Prasenjit Duara, “Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns Against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (1991): 75–80.

⁴⁴⁶ Leung, “Qingdai de Xizihui,” 91.

⁴⁴⁷ “Zhongwai xinwen,” *Shanghai xinbao*, November 5, 1868.

From Cutting to Carving

The late Qing – early Republic was an important transformational period for the commercialization of embroidery papercuts. The craft of papercuts required simple tools – a piece of paper and a set of scissors that were often found in an embroiderer’s tool kit. These common, low-cost materials were also available to the lower classes. When men picked up scissors and peddled papercuts, they transformed boudoir craft into a commercial product. As they developed their businesses, they established permanent workshops in cities and creatively altered “paper cutting” to mass produced “paper carving”. An environment for mass pattern reproduction was thus set up. The following section will discuss this transition with a focus on the city of Tianjin.

Tianjin was established as a fort in the early fifteenth century during Yongle’s reign in the Ming dynasty. In the early eighteenth century, Manchu rulers recognized Tianjin’s geographical and strategic advantages and upgraded it to an administrative prefecture.⁴⁴⁸ Located in the vicinity of Beijing and at the intersection of major land, canal and maritime routes, Tianjin soon became a prosperous city that enriched the lives and cultures of its residents. Factories, workshops, and stores attracted opportunity seekers from its peripheries and across the country. During the first two decades of the twentieth century Tianjin experienced profound development. Merchants, craftsmen, peasants, peddlers, and workers flocked to the city, greatly expanding the population and contributing to its vibrant urban culture.⁴⁴⁹ Yangliuqing 楊柳青, a village on the outskirts of Tianjin, was known for the production and marketing of *nianhua*.

⁴⁴⁸ Guo Yunjing and Tu Zongtao, *Tianjin gudai chengshi fazhan shi* (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1989), 109-113. Also see this book for the history of Tianjin in pre-modern period.

⁴⁴⁹ For population growth of Tianjin during Qing and Republican China, see Luo Shuwei ed, *Jindai Tianjin chengshi shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1993), 453-68. For the commercial development of Tianjin during the Qing, see Guo Yunjing, *Qingdai shangye shi* (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1994), 163-72.

Nianhua and papercut are related in various respects. Both used paper as a medium to create patterns, and both were recognized as art forms closely associated with commoners and peasants. As the connections between *nianhua* and papercuts await further investigation, they were both nodes in a larger network circulating popular themes and motifs. As Nancy Berliner observes, symbols and legends “derive from traditional morals” and “have been told over and over to illustrate them.”⁴⁵⁰ Patterns with certain motifs were found repeatedly in both *nianhua* and papercuts with similar layouts and shapes. For example, one recurring motif “*shizi gun xiuqiu*” 獅子滾繡球 (the lion sporting with an embroidered ball) combines the evil-repelling beast with an auspicious, colourful ball, signifying fortune in traditional culture. Other than papercuts, this motif appears on a wide range of items, such as a Hebei *nianhua*, a Jiangsu woodblock embroidery pattern, and a Sichuan print (figure 6.5). The broad geographical reach of this motif suggests a long-established system loosely connecting different handicrafts and incorporating *nianhua* and papercut craftsmen across China. Within this system, popular motifs were reinforced by being recreated and shared by makers.

Like professionals elsewhere who sought opportunities in the cities, papercut craftsmen put down roots in Tianjin. As noted by Wang Shucun, before the Guangxu era (1875-1908), there were no permanent papercut stores in Tianjin.⁴⁵¹ Mobile sellers started with setting up stalls at seasonal fairs and temple festivals, thus transforming products of amateur peasant women into popular merchandise made by professionals. Wang Shucun documents three seasonal craftsmen surnamed Wang 王, He 何, and Liu 劉, who attended festival and temple markets in Yangliuqing to sell their skills. They offered instant on-site papercuts, featuring auspicious motifs such as

⁴⁵⁰ Nancy Zeng Berliner, *Chinese Folk Art: The Small Skills of Carving Insects* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986,) 31.

⁴⁵¹ Wang, *Zhongguo minjian jianzhi yishu shihua*, 112.

yulong youxi 魚龍戲遊 (playful fish and dragon) and *qilin songzi* 麒麟送子 (Qilin delivers baby). When requested by buyers, the craftsmen were always able to customize their work “with scissors at ease and in no time.”⁴⁵² Many craftsmen, at this point, were still part-time sellers who worked alongside their farming duties.



Figure 6.5 The motif “shizi gun xiuqiu” from different sources: Lan Xianlin ed, *Minjian nianhua* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingongye chubanshe, 2005), 112; Zhang Daoyi, *Taowu xiugao: Minjian cixiu yu banke* (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013), 93; Nancy Zeng Berliner, *Chinese Folk Art: The Small Skills of Carving Insects* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1986,) 188.

It was the opening of shops in the city that transformed seasonal workers into permanent craftsmen. Wang Jinfu 王進福, also known as Wang Baotang 王寶堂, was one of the most accomplished mobile craftsmen in Yangliuqing.⁴⁵³ Several years before the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Wang founded Jinbao Zhai near Gu Lou 鼓樓 (the Drum Tower).⁴⁵⁴ Like other papercut shops, Jinbao Zhai was a workshop, a brand, and a store, undertaking both making and selling

⁴⁵² Wang, *Zhongguo minjian jianzhi yishu shihua*, 112.

⁴⁵³ For the writings on *jinbao zhai*, I rely largely on Wang, *Zhongguo minjian jianzhi yishu shihua*, 112, Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 1-13, 254-262, Cui Jin. *Tianjin minjian meishu* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 2015), 106-108, and Liu Quanli, “Huayangzi,” *Dagong bao* (Tianjin), Apr 17, 1934.

⁴⁵⁴ Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 12.

papercuts, although unlike his competitors Wang established his shop at the business center of the city and targeted mainly urban customers who had a high demand for fine patterns. Steeped in elaborate details, Wang excelled in quality products that earned Jinbao Zhai credentials and fame. Jinbao Zhai was later inherited by Wang's apprentice Yin Deyuan 尹德元, who came from Tianjin's neighboring province Hebei. Although Yin went back and forth between farm work in his hometown and Tianjin, he kept the shop alive throughout China's tumultuous Republican era.

In many cases, papercuts can be made without any sketching on the paper. Papercut makers are able to cut out a beautiful work after many repetitions of a familiar design. This seemingly impressive technique is supported by tricks shared among the insiders.⁴⁵⁵ First, unlike the regular use of scissors, when papercutting, one moves the paper rather than the scissors to create curves easily. Second, the proficiency of the technique is supported by practicing memorized patterns taught by a teacher. These patterns can then be combined or altered for new designs. Based on familiar patterns and experience, master craftsmen are able to create new patterns to be passed down to apprentices.⁴⁵⁶ As such, the execution of papercutting dictates that although they adhere to established patterns and standards, each individual papercut is a unique work of art.

In traditional papercutting, if the paper is thin enough, several identical pieces may be produced at one time. For a permanent workshop like Jinbao Zhai, however, this technique was not an effective way to make large quantities of identical papercuts. To make mass production

⁴⁵⁵ The technical description of papercutting relies on artist Li Shoubai's 李守白 textbook. See Li Shoubai, *Haipai shougong jiyi chuanxisuo shuangyu jiaocheng: Li Shoubai jianzhi* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2016), 22. Also see "Minjian yishu jianhuayang," *Zhenghui bao*, June 4, 1942.

⁴⁵⁶ Papercut craftsman Zheng Shulin 鄭樹林 comments that imitation and copying is a common technique adopted in papercutting, and that while innovation is rare can should be encouraged. See Zheng Shulin, "Cong Shanghai jian huayang shuoqi," *Meishu bao* 2009 (06): 1.

possible, professional papercut workshops adopted the technique of carving (*zhu* 筑 or *cu* 簇 in the Tianjin dialect), instead of cutting with scissors.⁴⁵⁷ The technique of paper carving seems to have come into existence during the Qing-Republican transition in various regions of China, possibly responding to the increasing popularity of homemade embroidery.⁴⁵⁸ During this time, craftsmen began to adopt innovative tools and techniques. In Tianjin, for example, papercut professionals would first convert clock springs into thin, sharp carving knives. Then, they would draw patterns on a cardboard and carve it into a reusable stencil. In the next step, a craftsman would place a stack of thin paper onto a self-made wax plate, while fixing the stencil on top. When the craftsman penetrated the paper stack with the carving knife, identical papercuts with elaborate patterns were created.⁴⁵⁹

Papercuts carved by the craftsmen delivered fashionable patterns to customers and dissolved the biggest technical difficulty of embroidery. Compared with underdrawings used in commercial workshops, papercuts were a tangible medium between designing and stitching that created convenient, ready-to-use patterns. Compared with pattern books, paper stencils released embroiderers from the task of drawing and lowered the technical threshold of embroidery. The low price of papercuts further enhanced the affordability of embroidery, allowing it to reach the broadest audience ever. Therefore, the carving technology created a pre-stage for mass production of papercuts across workshops and regions. Stencils were reusable to produce more papercuts than ever. They were thus tangibly conveying knowledge among craftsmen, who promoted the popularity of standardized layouts.

⁴⁵⁷ For the adoption of the carving technique in other areas and by other craftsmen, see, for example, Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 255; Liu Quanli, “Huayangzi,” *Dagong bao (Tianjin)*, Apr 17, 1934.

⁴⁵⁸ For example, Zhejiang contemporary local gazetteer records paper carving as folk art in Leqing 樂清. Zhejiang tongzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui. *Zhejiang tongzhi: Meishu zhi* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2019), 494-95.

⁴⁵⁹ For the description of the carving technique, see Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 255 and Zhang Daoyi, *Jianzi xiang huayang: Shandong minjian cixiu jianzhi* (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2012), 17-18.

Distributing Papercuts

Thanks to the carving technology, papercuts became mass-produced merchandise. Lightweight, easy to store, and convenient for reproduction, papercuts were widely distributed via various channels that promoted the popularity of certain motifs across region and time. One frequently appearing motif with variations, for example, was a combination of pomegranates and boys. With numerous seeds – “zi” 子, pomegranates imply the wish for male offspring. The Jinbao Zhai collection includes a pattern *liukai duozi* 榴開多子 (pomegranate opened with many sons). In a Shandong collection, multiple embroidery patterns for pillow ends feature pomegranates, and some with child figures. Among the pillow end patterns, one entitled *liukai jianxi* 榴開見囍 (open the pomegranate to witness happiness) has astonishingly similar layouts with that of the Jinbao Zhai pattern (figure 6.6). Both depict a vine at the bottom and feature a boy who sits between two halves of pomegranates. And similarly, each upper corner is decorated with a pomegranate flower.

Papercuts with striking resemblance were found elsewhere. Folklorist Feng Jicai 馮驥才 compares the similarity of papercuts in Yangliuqing and Chahar 察哈爾 in Northeast China and believes that the former was likely to be the origin of the latter.⁴⁶⁰ I contend that the production and sale of papercuts was facilitated by a flexible commercial network consisting of peddlers, permanent workshops, wholesalers, guilds, and apprentices. It is unclear which of these groups contributed to promoting Yangliuqing papercuts in Chahar – likely a combined force of several – they took an active role in popularizing papercuts and embroidery. The following section will

⁴⁶⁰ Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 262.

discuss how such the high levels of similarity can be attributed to the wide circulation of popular brands and names as well as apprentices who traveled across China.



Figure 6.6 Left: papercut *liukai duozi*, in Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 76. Right: papercut *liukai jianxi*, in Zhang Daoyi, *Jianzi xiang huayang: Shandong minjian cixiu jianzhi* (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2012),48.

An important venue for the circulation of papercuts was the seasonal and festival market, as the change in season brought the opportunity to create new garments that demonstrated the ingenuity and taste of ladies who served their families.⁴⁶¹ For example, during the Chongyang 重陽 Festival, five poisonous insects (scorpion, snake, centipede, wall lizard, and toad) patterned bellybands were made to protect children from diseases. During the Qixi Festival, *niulang zhinü* 牛郎織女 (Buffalo Boy and Weaver Girl) patterns were embroidered on purses by maidens as presents to their loved ones.⁴⁶² Seasonal papercuts were probably sold in advance of the season to give embroiderers enough time to accomplish their work. Although permanent shops such as

⁴⁶¹ There is a rich literature on the study of temple fairs (*miaohui* 廟會). For an overview, see James Flath, “Temple Fairs and the Republican State in North China,” *Twentieth-Century China* 30, no. 1 (2004): 39–63.

⁴⁶² There are countless papercut collections that can visually explain this point. For example, see the collection frequently mentioned in this chapter Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*. Republican Chongming gazetteer states that “embroider wudu on the bellyband... can impede the evils 五毒繡肚兜...可辟邪,” in *Minguo Chongmingxian zhi* Vol. 4 (1924), 152, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

Jinbao Zhai in Tianjin offered their customers the convenience of purchasing papercuts all year round, temporary market holders and mobile peddlers were still important intermediaries for the circulation of papercuts, especially in small towns and rural areas. Peddlers obtained papercuts wholesale from workshops located in major cities and then brought them to surrounding regions. For instance, patterns from Jinbao Zhai had a wide distribution in northern provinces such as Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi, and as far as the Northeast corner of China.⁴⁶³ Peddlers carried small, thin, and lightweight papercuts to travel from village to village, or to set up stalls at festival markets and temple fairs, drawing buyers from miles away.

Commercial areas in big cities, in contrast, became hubs for papercut studios. The west city wall area in Tianjin, the Confucius Temple in Nanjing, and the Chenghuang Temple in Shanghai were all commercial areas hosting major papercut workshops.⁴⁶⁴ In the beginning of the twentieth century papercutting was a lucrative business. In the 1920s, shoe patterns usually cost two copper coins. Large or complex items were more expensive – a pattern for *goutou mao* 狗頭帽 (a form of decorative hat for children) was eight copper coins and patterns to decorate *weijian* 圍肩 (cloud collar) were worth six copper coins.⁴⁶⁵ As a business with almost no overhead, in the early years, papercuts men enjoyed a stable income.

In the 1930s and the 1940s, however, the papercut business became less profitable. The artisans first suffered from competition when more peers joined in, resulting in a lower price for their products in the 1930s. Then universal inflation in the 1940s affected the affordability of

⁴⁶³ Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 256.

⁴⁶⁴ For a table listing business centers that were clustered with papercut workshops, see Huang Benliang, “Cong minjian chuzou dao fangui xiangtu: Bainian Zhongguo minjian jianzhi yishu shanbian yanjiu.” (PhD diss., Shanghai University, 2018), 47.

⁴⁶⁵ Data reflects 1922 price in Hubei. Han Jing, “Jingchu minjian huayang gonghui zhidu tanxi” (Master’s thesis, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, 2019), 18.

fabrics and threads, thus dampening the enthusiasm for embroidery.⁴⁶⁶ A 1930 Tianjin newspaper reported the price for three pieces of papercut sold by an old lady to be worth two copper coins, much lower than the 1920s numbers above.⁴⁶⁷ In Jinbao Zhai, the price seemed to be lower with two copper coins for four small pieces.⁴⁶⁸ A 1940 price list indicated that one was “unable to maintain” a livelihood only by selling papercuts.⁴⁶⁹

In some places, guilds came to play a role in stabilizing the business, which also promoted the sharing of patterns within its members. In Hubei province, for example, local guilds were established throughout the 1930s.⁴⁷⁰ The guild absorbed local artisans and formed various rules and policies, but its major function was to protect members by expelling competition from outside craftsmen, fixing the price, and supervising the strict process of apprenticeship.⁴⁷¹ To a certain extent, guilds facilitated communication between members. Particularly, by ordering that all patterns were to be shared within a guild, and popular designs and layouts became accessible for members.⁴⁷²

Although the papercut business was led by men, women were not excluded from this profession as they enjoyed the advantages of a closer relationship to customers than their male counterparts. Primary sources suggest that women engaged in this business no later than the 1930s as both vendor and apprentice. Indeed, commoners and lower-class women would have certain freedoms to personally visit papercut shops. However, to reach affluent daughters and

⁴⁶⁶ Sha Fei, “Jian huayang,” *Libao*, Feb 18, 1936.

⁴⁶⁷ “Jinshi zhiye de funü shenghuo: Nüzi cixiu xueshe yiban,” *Dagong bao (Tianjin)*, March 15, 1930.

⁴⁶⁸ Liu Quanli, “Huayangzi,” *Dagong bao (Tianjin)*, April 17, 1934.

⁴⁶⁹ From a 1944 price list kept by a Wuhan artisan. See Zhang Daoyi, *Taowu xiugao: minjian cixiu yu banke* (Jinan: Shandong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2013), 49.

⁴⁷⁰ Han Jing, “Jingchu minjian huayang gonghui zhidu tanxi” (Master’s thesis, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, 2019), 7-8.

⁴⁷¹ For a case study of one papercut guild in Hubei, see Han Jing, “Jingchu minjian huayang gonghui zhidu tanxi.” Master’s thesis, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, 2019.

⁴⁷² Han, “Jingchu minjian huayang gonghui zhidu tanxi.” 10-11.

wives who stayed concealed from the public eye, workshops had to dispatch apprentices to wealthy communities for door-to-door sales. Sometimes, maids were sent out for purchases, and if lucky, earned tips granted by their mistresses. But the opportunity of forming lasting ties with their patrons was more likely to be given to female vendors, who had the gender advantage to be invited to inner chambers for conversations and the careful selection of products, as reported by a Tianjin newspaper.⁴⁷³ Possibly for the purpose of better serving female customers, Tianjin Jinbao Zhai solicited a female student Deng Yucang 鄧玉蒼, who worked with four male apprentices.⁴⁷⁴

Apprenticeship promised maintenance of the workshop and continuity of a brand from one generation to the next. Taking Jinbao Zhai for example, the workshop founded by Wang Jinfu was kept by his best student Yin Deyuan. Then after Yin inherited the store, he solicited five apprentices, of whom Zhang Shukui 張書奎 and Deng Yucang 鄧玉蒼 were the most famous. The team maintained the operation of Jinbao Zhai throughout the war years until the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In the 1950s, Jinbao Zhai merged with Tianjin Arts and Crafts Factory 天津工藝美術廠 as one workshop of the factory. Thereafter, Yin worked at the factory and as a teacher tutoring local students until the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. After this chaotic period, one of Yin's students, Zhang Shukui assumed the mantle of papercutting.⁴⁷⁵ Additionally, students passed all the auxiliary skills down to later generations.

⁴⁷³ A news article describes an old lady who sold papercuts in women's boudoirs of well-to-do families. See "Mai zhi huayangzi de furen," *Dagong bao (Tianjin)*, March 27, 1930. Mature women were seen as more suitable middle persons entering different houses than young women due to their experience and, presumably, because of their diminished sexuality. In her book, Yi Ruolan discusses senior ladies who acted as middle-persons connecting maidens and young wives to outsiders. See Yi Ruolan, *Sangu liupo: Mingdai funü yu shehui de tansuo* (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2016), 100-127.

⁴⁷⁴ See Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 256-57.

⁴⁷⁵ Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 8-9, 254-57.

When art historian Zhang Daoyi visited Jianzi Xiang (剪子巷 scissors alley) in his hometown in the 1950s, he was still able to learn the techniques of making wax plate and other handy tools.⁴⁷⁶

Other than maintaining a brand, apprenticeship also cultivated craftsmen who spread specific techniques of the master craftsmen to other areas. In this respect, the city of Tianjin, once again, was deemed as a major learning base for papercut craft as several top technicians gathered in this place. Tianjin's papercutting techniques thus were disseminated by countless young people who went to Tianjin to learn from the best craftsmen, including Wang and Yin, and then carried the techniques and patterns back to their hometowns and other locations. Even in 2017 a report was published celebrating the massive, profitable papercut center in Fu Cheng 阜城, Hebei Province as a modern enterprise rooted in local traditional papercut handicraft.⁴⁷⁷

Interestingly, the report cites a local papercut legend dating to Jin-Yuan dynasties several hundred years earlier, thus claiming that papercuts originated locally. Nonetheless, the report gives credit to Tianjin by tracing the origin of this craft to master Wang Wantian 王萬田 in the 1950s who obtained his knowledge from a workshop in Tianjin.

Embroidering on Papercuts

When a peasant embroiderer receives a piece of papercut, her subjectivity comes into play. She could certainly achieve it by selecting several patterns to embellish the fabric,⁴⁷⁸ and by making choices of threads, colours, and techniques to craft an aesthetically pleasing piece. But the following section will demonstrate that the subjectivity of a peasant embroiderer also lies

⁴⁷⁶ Zhang, *Jianzi xiang huayang*, 12-17.

⁴⁷⁷ Mei Xiao, "'Jian' chu de zhifu lu," *Gongchandang yuan* 2017, 01: 50-51.

⁴⁷⁸ Small patterns, known as *xiao yihua* 小衣花 (small decorating patterns) and *tuanhua* 團花 (floral roundels) are designed to decorate a larger fabric. For a range of papercuts to be liberally combined and sewn onto clothes, See Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 52-115.

in areas other than stitching. Her subjectivity starts with reproducing papercuts, and it does not end when the embroidery is finished. The papercutting skills, alongside embroidery techniques, create an idealized model of capable rural women, who reinforce skills, aesthetics, and the values imbued in papercuts and embroideries by communicating with each other.

Paper is ephemeral, and the cultural and artistic entities that it constructs – books, woodblock prints, and paper gods – are prone to destruction. In the case of papercuts for embroidery, particularly, paper is destroyed as stitching proceeds. However, at a peasant woman's house, papercuts are not merely being consumed. With the adoption of the *xunyang* 熏样 (pattern smoking) technique, they could also be copied. This technique is recorded in several interviews with folk embroiderers, which generally refers to a process of transferring patterns from paper to paper by utilizing a common household item in the early and middle twentieth century – the oil lamp. The papercut is first attached to a piece of dampened paper, and then the two layers are smoked by holding them over an oil lamp. By doing so, a dark print is left on the damp paper, which is to be dried and cut out to create an identical copy of the original.⁴⁷⁹

The *xunyang* skill allows a peasant woman to save and reproduce her favorite patterns, thus adding a level of capability to her role as a fully-fledged wife. Primary sources suggest that skills in embroidery and papercutting were associated with positive images of peasant women, contrasting the ambivalent status of late imperial boudoir ladies. As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, whether embroidery signified a diligent or lazy woman was constantly debated among intellectuals. The main charges against embroidery included pricy materials, the waste of valuable time, and implied sexual associations. By contrast, peasant embroidery

⁴⁷⁹ For one account describing the *xunyang* technique, see Shang Jie ed, *Tianjin minsu* (Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe, 2004), 326.

practices emerging after the mid-Qing did not acquire the same negative reputation. Lower-class women became embroiderers primarily to earn income, which was seen as helping the family. When ordinary women began to embroider, silk was no longer a luxury thanks to the Qing governments' promotion of sericulture, as discussed in Chapter One. More importantly, the availability of cotton fabrics and threads became a cheap alternative for peasant embroidery. Lastly, peasant women were less confined by etiquette and were less subject to the sexual connotations suggested by embroidery.

Qing and Republican literature depicts papercutting as a means to build relationships among village women, gain merit, and possibly earn money. For example, a Republican Shaanxi gazetteer portrays village lady Wang Shi 王氏 as having exceptional papercutting and embroidery techniques. At home, she was able to “bring happiness to parents-in-law,” and as a reputable local lady, she received respect from each event when her handicraft decorated the venue and “all viewers were amazed”.⁴⁸⁰ In the setting of a modern village, papercutting was one of the essential female technologies that enabled a peasant woman to be “nengxing” (能行 capable). Ku Shulan 庫淑蘭, whose papercuts were famous among the locals in a small, remote Shaanxi village in the 1980s, was such a capable woman. Other than delivering papercuts to neighbors, Ku served as a shamaness frequenting homes in need. By serving the local, and with payment or not, she nonetheless became popular and resourceful in the village.⁴⁸¹ Although Ku's story reflected village customs in the latter half of the twentieth century, it has roots back to the early period of the century.

⁴⁸⁰ “能博堂上歡”，“觀者無不訝。” *Minguo Xuxiu Dalidian jiuuzhi cunqao* Vol. 12 (1936), 276, in the database The Collection of Chinese Local Gazetteers.

⁴⁸¹ Zhao Yugong, “Zoujin Ku Shulan,” *Minjian wenhua*, 2000, (03): 16-19.

One example from a village in the Shanxi province may explain how capable women used embroidery skill to help build their community and for relationships. This is an embroidered patchwork-hanging now kept at the Textile Museum of Canada (hereafter TMC, figure 6.7). Pieced together from dozens of embroidered patches, the textile is in a style known as *baihua zhang* 百花帳 (one hundred flower valance), usually hung over the top of the deity statue at temples as protection from dust.⁴⁸² Each patch is a polychrome embroidery artwork with flowery design and sometimes auspicious phrases on coloured cloth made by an individual woman from a local village. As many pieces in this particular TMC item are inscribed with the author's personal name and village title, it can be inferred that this valance once served at a local temple in Linyi 临猗, a region in south Shanxi where peasantry embroidery flourished in the Republican era.⁴⁸³

Patchwork embroidery was closely associated with local festive and religious events, which created a venue emphasizing an individual woman's input. Other than *baihua zhang*, Shanxi peasant women also made patchwork *paopi* 炮皮 (skin of cannon) to decorate ceremonial cannons.⁴⁸⁴ Patches for such works had to be carefully chosen from embroideries made by new wives and then to be assembled by local master embroiderers. The finished piece was displayed during a religious festival when all families participated and celebrated.⁴⁸⁵ This was a special

⁴⁸² The custom of making collective patchwork embroidery as religious devotion is shared by some other regions, and mostly in Shanxi's adjacent provinces in middle reach of the Yellow River. See, for example, *baihua zhang* in Shaanxi Qianyang. In Zhang Xichang, *Qianyang buyi* (Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin meishu chubanshe, 2008), 62-63.

⁴⁸³ For a survey on Shanxi peasantry embroidery, see Zhou Heng ed., *Shanxi gongyi meishu shi* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2013), 467-76.

⁴⁸⁴ Ceremonial cannons repel the evils during festivals and events such as the Spring Festival Parade. For an example of a ceremonial cannon decorated with patchwork embroidery, see Wen Xing and Xue Maixi, *Shanxi minsu* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1991), 506-07.

⁴⁸⁵ Bo Songnian and Duan Gaifang ed, *Zhongguo minjian meishu quanji 4: Shanxi* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1993), 3.

event for new wives to debut their skills in public, partake in local affairs, as well as embedding their emotions and wishes in small panels for receiving blessings for the new family.



Figure 6.7 Left: an embroidered patchwork-hanging at the Textile Museum of Canada (accession No. T89.0050). Upper right: written words at the front of one patch, which read *Wuzhong cun* (Wuzhong village) and *Zhang Shuangxi koushang* (Zhang Shuangxi with kowtows). Bottom right: written words at the back of one patch, which read *Lian Haiqing qi koushang* (wife of Lian Haiqing with kowtows) and *Wuzhong cun* (Wuzhong village). Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada. The two pictures on the right-hand side are photographed by the author.

Baihua zhang functioned as a platform on which to showcase the needlework of new wives and promote the exchange of embroidery ideas and skills among peasant women. They carefully selected delicate and novel patterns and techniques. The stitches chosen for this TMC item are popular stitches among peasant embroiderers, easy to comprehend and constructable in

intricate design with variations.⁴⁸⁶ Major stitches on the valance include, for example, *tao zhen* 套針, *dingxian xiu* 釘線繡, and *purong xiu* 鋪絨繡.⁴⁸⁷ One particular patch, when decorating a joyful character “xi” 囍 (a word commonly used for celebrating weddings and new couples), uses only cross-stitches (figure 6.8). Unlike blue and white colours that are usually applied in Chinese folk embroidery, this patch utilizes a range of polychrome threads that reflect the new



Figure 6.8 Details of several patches with various stitches applied. Upper left: the leaf in *purong xiu* and stems in *dingxian xiu*. Bottom left: flower pedals in *tao zhen*. Right: a patch entirely done in the cross-stitch.

Photographed by the author. Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

⁴⁸⁶ For a list of common peasant embroidery stitches, see Han Zhengang ed, *Zhongguo minjian meishu shiyan jiaocheng* (Hefei: Anhui meishu chubanshe, 2015), 75-76.

⁴⁸⁷ *Tao zhen*, stitch sets, refers to a series of stitches that combines long and short satin stitches. See Zhan Bihua, *Chuantong cixiu zhenfa jicui* (Zhengzhou: Henan kexue jishu chubanshe, 2017), 56-60. *Dingxian xiu*, couching stitches were inserted down into the fabric while wrapping around other threads. See Dieter Kuhn and Zhao Feng, ed, *Chinese Silks* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 479. *Purong xiu*, also known as *pingxiu* 平繡 (flat stitches), is to use embroidery threads from weft and warp directions to weave the pattern onto the surface of the fabric. See Juan Shanshan, *Cixiu* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 2009), 114.

fashion. This valance is a form of material evidence demonstrating how textiles played a role in the communication of peasant women, which was modeled by skilled women showcasing their ability.

This valance also reminds of embroidery's capability in beautifying the surroundings with designs combining words and images. As explored by Catherine Pagani, elite images, ideas, and values were found on early twentieth century Sichuan folk cotton embroideries.⁴⁸⁸ Similarly, papercuts were convenient mediums for the reproduction and interpretation of elite culture by non-elites. Art historian Zhang Daoyi 張道一 noticed that papercuts with text were double the price of non-text patterns.⁴⁸⁹ This implied that the ability to cut characters was a special skill that was valued by papercut clientele. This skill enabled non-elites to recreate elite culture in a transplanted environment. The MIA artefact, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, incorporates visual components of rank badges into the design and thus represents a humble embroiderer's wish for a better lifestyle. When phrases and couplets are reproduced by papercutting, they are integrated into the overall design.

The Jinbao Zhai collection includes several good examples of patterns that demonstrate how characters become an integral part of the design. In one case, a *dudou* (肚兜 belly band) pattern highlights a couplet "when at home always be *ruyi*; when outside home be safe forever." (Figure 6.9) As Chapter Three explains, *ruyi* serves as a ceremonial scepter and a symbol of good luck. It was usually made with expensive materials such as jade and gold, which indicated its association with elite culture.⁴⁹⁰ *Ruyi* may have an early origin, but its popularity did not reach

⁴⁸⁸ Catherine Pagani, "From Woodblock to Textile: Imagery of Elite Culture in the Blue-and-White Embroideries of Sichuan," *Canadian Art Review* 1997, Vol. 24, No. 1, 28-41.

⁴⁸⁹ Zhang, *Taowu xiugao*, 49.

⁴⁹⁰ Qi Zhongming and Lu Peng, "Zhongguo gudai 'ruyi' kao," *Mudanjiang shifan xueyuan xuebao* No. 3, 2022: 56-63.

its peak until the Qing dynasty and particularly among royal members and high officials.⁴⁹¹ Because of its auspicious association, the term “*ruyi*” was also used as an adjective in various occasions. In the Forbidden Palace, Emperor Yongzheng inscribed “*ping’an ju*” (平安居 the residence of peace and safety) and “*ruyi shi*” (如意室 the room of satisfaction) on plaques respectively.⁴⁹² In the Jinbao Zhai papercut, “*ruyi*” and “*ping’an*” are used to recreate a couplet that caters to customers from ordinary families. In addition, the structural neatness often found in calligraphy is less emphasized here – the last character of the first sentence is rearranged to the beginning of the second sentence to align with the overall layout. The couplet becomes as decorative as the bottom flowers, diverging from the elite approach.



Figure 6.9 A belly bandage papercut pattern with the phrase that reads “在家長如意 出外永平安。” Feng ed, *Xiaoshi de huayang*, 138.

⁴⁹¹ Chen Qing, ““Ruyi’ shihua,” *Shanghai gongyi meishu* 2022, (02): 4-6.

⁴⁹² Yu Minzhong ed, *Rixia jiuwen kao* (Beijing: Beijinggujichubanshe, 1981), 268.

Conclusion

The papercut as a patterning tool for embroidery removed the most daunting step, underdrawing, for home embroiderers. Thanks to professional craftsmen, papercut workshops, peddlers, and wholesalers, the handiwork of embroidery was embraced by women in Republican China transcending class, regional, and ethnic differences. This chapter examined one papercut studio in Tianjin, Jinbao Zhai. Although the surviving primary sources are fragmentary – a collection of extant patterns, a Shandong papercut artwork with similar details, and a contemporary Hebei news article connecting the local papercut industry to Tianjin, these are traces indicating the broad reach that Tianjin papercuts once achieved. Several factors facilitated papercuts to be mass produced: lightweight papercuts were able to be carried in bulk, memorized and standardized patterns were transferrable through apprenticeship, and the carving technique produced dozens and hundreds of pages at once. In addition, women embroiderers copied, applied, and exchanged papercuts, as both consumer and producer. Embroidery papercuts were situated in a larger network of sharing, interpreting, and recreating motifs, layouts, and values with a wide range of cultural products, such as *nianhua* from popular culture, and calligraphy from elite circles.

Conclusion

This dissertation studied the complex problems associated with making embroidery in nineteenth and early twentieth century China. Against the backdrop of a society experiencing dramatic social, economic, and cultural transformation, embroidery underwent commensurate changes and adaptations. Most noticeably, as Rachel Silberstein comments, in the late Qing, embroidery became the “dominant patterning technique” for textiles.⁴⁹³ Or as the Republican intellectual Sheng Guocheng wrote, “embroidery embellishes every piece of fabric.”⁴⁹⁴ The ubiquity of embroidery implies that this handiwork had extended beyond boudoir makers and was adopted by a much broader public. This phenomenal development raises the research question for this thesis: how did embroidery become so popular, and how was it learned by so many people from such diverse backgrounds?

To answer to this question, I investigated the technical transformation of embroidery from the Qing to the Republic and exposed the embroidery industry’s complex human relations. Embroidery was a mechanism that involved not only simple hand movements of stitching, but also pattern designing, underdrawing, sometimes thread dying, and sometimes business management. Its practitioners were essentially bonded to changing gender relations and power struggles to which they contributed. The stereotype of the refined boudoir lady who embodied her intelligence in the handiwork was undone by the reality of a diverse and distributed production system. Business managers, male painters, male master embroiderers, female

⁴⁹³ Rachel Silberstein, *A Fashionable Century: Textile Artistry and Commerce in the Late Qing* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 77.

⁴⁹⁴ “繡無一處不用。” See Sheng Guocheng, “Wanjiu Zhongguo cixiuye chuyi,” *Nanyang shangwu bao* No. 54 (1908): 1.

homestay workers, woman reformers, and papercut professionals are just the most obvious professions that were tied to embroidery. It was through the collaboration and competition of these groups that the handiwork of embroidery went beyond gentry ladies and came to be apprehended by the masses.

As discussed throughout this dissertation, among all the procedures in embroidering, patterning was the most difficult and demanded the most training. Gentry ladies might learn to draw through privileged education, while male professionals might be vocationally trained. Embroiderers who did not possess painting skills were forced to rely on patterns. In a well-organized commercial workshop, pattern designing and underdrawing were typically done by male professionals, who were usually the highest paid. In non-professional settings, amateur embroiderers relied on woodblock printed patterns, cross-stitch patterns, and papercut stencils. These methods reduced the technical difficulty and helped to propagate embroidery, making it available to a wider audience.

This dissertation started with a discussion of Qing gentry embroiderers, who were able to draw and stitch, creating painting-like embroideries that astounded onlookers. Imperial and commercial workshops were explored next. The former employed strict supervision, rare and expensive materials, and intricate techniques to represent the authority of officialdom, while the latter relied on specialization and collaboration to produce fashionable pieces. Moving forward to the early twentieth century, embroidery reformers advocated for controlling the entire process of embroidery as independent artists. By synthesizing Western three-dimensional perspective, the reformed embroidery was deemed modern and aimed at capturing the international market. Meanwhile, polychrome cross-stitch – the Western introduced embroidery became fashionable

for simple yet novel patterns. Eventually, it was papercuts that removed the patterning obstacle and promoted embroidery to peasant amateurs.

Considering the substantial role that it has played in the lives of both men and women, the history of Chinese embroidery, as well as other textiles, deserves much more attention. As Grace Fong observes, “embroidery is a rich topic that can be fruitfully approached from a number of disciplinary perspectives: material culture, art history, social and economic history, and science and technology, to name but a few.”⁴⁹⁵ While there are a variety of ways to explore the history of embroidery, scholarly attention largely focuses on the pre-modern, especially late imperial period. The omission of the Republican era is particularly evident. Republican China was a dynamic period showcasing embroidery’s engagement with diverse groups, events, and ideas. For example, when conservative intellectuals were still denouncing the extravagance of embroidery, reformers were already constructing China’s international reputation by modernizing embroidery. It was my intention to uncover these neglected stories.

There were limitations to the research. As stated in the introduction, the history of Chinese embroidery has seldom been studied, which is largely due to the fragmentary nature of the source materials. To overcome this issue, I drew heavily on comparative material culture for new sources and perspectives. The chapters in this dissertation were organized both chronologically and thematically with each chapter focusing on a type of embroidery defined by the technology employed or its application. Each chapter began with the technical analysis of an embroidery or an embroidery related object, which prompted the research question. The material culture approach to Chinese embroidery, however, is still challenging. First, there are few records of this orally transmitted technology, and thus analysis essentially involves the

⁴⁹⁵ Fong, Grace S. "Female Hands: Embroidery as a Knowledge Field in Women's Everyday Life in Late Imperial and Early Republican China." *Late Imperial China* 25, no. 1 (2004): 3.

translation of textile structures and stitches into words. That methodology requires access to the items, most of which are in museum collections that were closed through much of the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, the value of materials collected from flea markets and kept in private collections is limited due to the lack of provenance. As my study of cross-stitch and papercuts used objects without sufficient documentation, my strategy changed from detailing individual items to recognizing their positions in a larger network.

These difficulties have encouraged me to seek interdisciplinary approaches, and thus the main contribution of my dissertation is its integration of material culture, gender history, and the history of technology. In recent decades Chinese material and visual culture studies have recognized how history is embodied in things like paintings, jade carvings, New Year prints, and architecture. During the transitional period of late Qing and Republican China, in particular, embroidery opens a window onto what Jane Schneider calls “the widest imaginable category of material culture.”⁴⁹⁶ In Schneider’s important reflective article, she claims that cloth and clothing in the study of material culture encompasses a wide range of topics such as self-enhancement and ritual, courtly production and consumption, and the expansion of Western capitalism and fashion.⁴⁹⁷ Chinese embroidery discussed in this dissertation has explored these dimensions by demonstrating its fluidity and capability for adaptation. Not only did embroidery shift from boudoir ladies and male officials to city consumers and foreign customers, and to peasant and minority women, but it also connected these groups without placing them in opposition. For example, the rank badges analyzed in Chapter Two and Chapter Six bridged officials, peasants, and foreign collectors by configuring the same piece of fabric. Moreover, as

⁴⁹⁶ Jane Schneider, “Cloth and Clothing,” in Christopher Tilley edited, *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: SAGE, 2006), 203.

⁴⁹⁷ Schneider, “Cloth and Clothing,” 203-20.

Chapter Four and Five demonstrated, Western capitalism transformed and stimulated local textile traditions rather than suppressing them.

The exploration of late Qing and Republican embroidery allows one to re-evaluate gender relations. My investigation of embroidery industry is especially illuminating for the way it details the roles of both genders in this so-called “women’s sphere”. As Francesca Bray finds with respect to male fabric weaving in late imperial China,⁴⁹⁸ this study has demonstrated men’s important, and oftentimes essential, roles in the making of embroidery. In both late Qing and Republican China, women’s embroidery work was home-based, seasonal, independent, and often isolating. Men, in contrast, took on the roles of business managers, pattern painters, and master embroiderers who worked collectively in public. While women did the bulk of embroidery work, their roles were largely subordinate to those performed by men. The Republican embroidery reform explored in Chapter Four, however, demonstrates an attempt by women to transform themselves into openly celebrated artists.

Finally, this dissertation contributes to the history of Chinese technology. In Western academia, the exploration of the history of technology in China was pioneered by Joseph Needham, who recognized how the particular conditions, including social conditions, of Chinese technology differed from the West.⁴⁹⁹ This understanding was further developed by historians such as Francesca Bray and Dorothy Ko, who examined female participation in technology and reconstructed technology as an arena for both men and women.⁵⁰⁰ My writing explains how the technology of embroidery essentially created social relations for people based on their positions

⁴⁹⁸ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 226-36.

⁴⁹⁹ See the monumental piece Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: University Press, 1954).

⁵⁰⁰ See Bray, *Technology and Gender* and Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

in the technology. Onlookers who did not understand this technology would admire boudoir embroiderers as occult technicians, as discussed in Chapter One. In a collaborative mode, as described in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, the technical excellence of different artisans created a hierarchical system that fostered tensions. Finally, it was the change in patterning method, the crucial technique in the making of embroidery, that shaped new relations and lowered the threshold of embroidery. Boudoir ladies who were well cultivated in painting knowledge kept the secret of embroidery to themselves and amazed male elites. Cross-stitch pattern books encouraged city girls to imagine a modern, global society to which they belong. In the end, it was papercuts that removed the final obstacle of patterning, allowing peasant women to enjoy the social capital afforded by the art of embroidery.

In a broader sense, the exploration of the history of embroidery enables one to understand late Qing – Republican society from the bottom-up. As top-down approaches would focus on new political entities, policies, and economies, my analysis of the making of embroidery demonstrates how both people and technology responded to challenges and opportunities in a constantly redefined context. Embroidery, the cultural icon that embodied the glory of Chinese civilization and female virtue, certainly came to a turning point. As this study has suggested, embroidery and embroiderers were more than capable of adapting to the world beyond the inner chambers.

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