

Shu Embroidery in Sichuan, China: The Social Life of Things from a Cultural Perspective and Their Contemporary Evolution

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Abstract: Shu embroidery, recognized as a distinguished brand of Sichuan, serves as a link between the people and society of the Sichuan region, and its evolution is intimately connected to the social life of this area. This study adopts a fresh perspective to investigate Shu embroidery, utilizing Arjun Appadurai's concept of "the social life of things" and putting emphasis on the social and cultural features of things. Arjun Appadurai regards things as an embodiment of social relations and cultural views, meaning that their significance doesn't just depends on how practical they are but on how they are endowed with the role of representative. By integrating literature research with field investigations conducted in Pixian, Sichuan, and interviews with key informants including intangible cultural heritage inheritors, government officials, and local residents, the research explores the relationship between Shu embroidery and the social, economic, and cultural phenomena of various eras in China. This analysis of Shu embroidery culture enables to deepen people's understanding of the social life of things in Sichuan and the whole China. At the same time, the study dissects the development and innovation of Shu embroidery in contemporary social life. It concludes that as an entity intertwined with social life, Shu embroidery has experienced the diverse historical periods of Sichuan, China. Throughout its evolution, one can observe the unique social, historical, and cultural connotations of Sichuan in different phases. Furthermore, the study analyzes the transformation of Shu embroidery from historical craftsmanship to contemporary art, discussing the dynamics and directions of this evolution in the context of historical and contemporary developments. It specifies the concrete directions for the modern application of Shu embroidery in terms of themes, techniques, materials, and artistic forms, offering insights for the sustainable development of Shu embroidery and other traditional crafts and fine arts.

Keywords: Shu embroidery, Social life, Contemporary transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on Shu embroidery, a representative of Sichuan

handicrafts in China. Due to societal evolution, the value of Shu embroidery extends beyond the artwork itself, intertwining closely with nature, society, culture, politics, and economy. Thus, the concept of "the social life of things" is a potent perspective for understanding the societal and cultural significance of objects. Employing the notions of "the social life of things" and "contemporary transformation," this research conducts a qualitative analysis of Shu embroidery, integrating historical sources and relevant literature to primarily examine its social history (Durham, 1923). By analyzing the changes in the significance of Shu embroidery across different periods, social statuses, and cultural backgrounds, the study describes the evolution of its styles and expressions. Shu embroidery not only reflects the societal changes in Sichuan but also serves as a cultural symbol with multiple identity traits (Paula, 2014). In the context of contemporary societal backgrounds, aesthetic preferences, market demands, and environmental considerations, the study explores how Shu embroidery should adapt its form and artistic aesthetics to modern society (Silberstein, 2017). Therefore, the research objectives of this study are twofold. First, it aims to investigate the "social life" of objects represented by Shu embroidery in different periods of Sichuan, analyzing the relationship between Shu embroidery and Sichuan's social life across various eras. Second, it seeks to interpret the contemporary aesthetic evolution of Shu embroidery through the view of Sichuan's "social life of things," laying a foundation for the development and heritage of Shu embroidery art. Meanwhile, the study provides a reference for other researchers in terms of research methodologies and conceptual applications (Shih et al., 2016; Siegel, 2023).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is a foundational research conducted by qualitative research methods. It primarily collects two types of data: field investigation data from Pixian, Sichuan, and literature data. Data are gathered through interviews with local national and provincial intangible cultural heritage inheritors of Shu embroidery, local and national government officials, and consumers of Shu embroidery. This is supplemented with literature and general related documents, paper-based files, and information collected from internet systems. The objective is to understand the developmental history and current state of Shu embroidery, as well as contemporary consumers' aesthetic demands for Shu embroidery. Based on the collected

interview materials and literature, the study aims to comprehend the formation and development of Shu embroidery. It then summarizes and analyzes the "social life of things" represented by Shu embroidery in the Sichuan region and contemporary aesthetic requirements.

3. DEFINITION OF TERMS

3.1 Shu Embroidery

In this study, Shu embroidery serves as the central. It primarily refers to the embroidery from the Chengdu-centered Western Sichuan Plain, also known as "Chuan embroidery." Esteemed as the "Treasure of Shu," it is praised in Chang Qu's "Huayang Guo Zhi Shu Zhi" (Chronicles of the State of Huayang - Sichuan Records). As one of China's four famous embroideries, alongside Suzhou, Hunan, and Guangdong embroidery, Shu embroidery is a traditional Chinese craft involving the creation of patterns on silk or other fabrics using silk threads. With a history of approximately 3000 years, it is one of the oldest types of embroidery in China. The technique encompasses 12 major categories and 122 types, making it the most diverse among the four famous embroideries. In 2006, Shu embroidery was listed in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage. In 2012, it was officially recognized as a geographical indication protected product by the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of China (Li & Xiong, 2017).

3.2 The Social Life of Things.

The concept of "the social life of things" refers to the role and participation of items within human societal systems. This concept underscores that objects are not merely passively used or owned; instead, they play a more active role within social relationships, influencing interactions, identities, and culture. The social life of objects highlights their role as participants in society, impacting social behaviors and meanings (Wang, 2014). The *Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* written by Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai, 1988) emphasizes the social and cultural features of things, exploring how things are endowed with different significance under varying cultural and social background. The author proposes the concept of "life cycle of things", putting an emphasis on the change of things in terms of social relations and significance from its production to consumption (Wang, 2011). Using Shu embroidery as a focal point, this analysis explores the complex and multi-

layered social phenomena that arise from the interplay of various factors—economic, political, cultural, psychological, environmental—among producers and consumers in the Sichuan region. Shu embroidery is more than just a material object; it is a result of long-term human interactions, also serving as a media for transmitting identity, social class, cultural values, and aesthetic concepts. The connections between Shu embroidery and people influence social relations, societal norms, and the identity recognition of individuals and groups (Wang et al., 2017b). This concept help us deeply understand the role and impact of Shu embroidery in society. It also provides a greater comprehension of the social lifestyles and value systems of people in the Sichuan region through the study of Shu embroidery (Huang, 2024).

3.3 Contemporary Transformation

The term transformation, originating from Jia Yi's "Fu on the Owl", reflects the concept of continuous transformation and succession in essence and form. It embodies the natural evolution and transition in accordance with historical development pathways, highlighting the natural integration and transmission of elemental energy and physical forms (Qiao et al., 2015). In the context of Shu embroidery, contemporary evolution is an artistic revival that preserves its inherent cultural essence (Feng, 2016). The greatest highlight of this paper lies in that its departure from traditional modes of thought. Starting from the perspective of the social life of Shu embroidery, the study explores the new forms that traditional Shu embroidery assumes in its contemporary evolution, in alignment with relevant government policies (Wang et al., 2017a). By adopting a progressive and developmental approach to Shu embroidery art, it aims to integrate it with the public environment, thus comprehensively showcasing the dynamic inheritance of traditional craftsmanship.

4. RESEARCH CONTENT

4.1 The Origin of Shu Embroidery

The Sichuan Basin, surrounded by high mountains, boasts the fertile lands of Western Sichuan. Its mild climate and abundant rainfall create favorable conditions for agriculture. The Chengdu Plain, with its fertile soil and pleasant climate, is particularly suitable for sericulture, the cultivation of mulberry trees, and silkworm rearing. "Shu" refers to a type of wild silkworm. According to the "Rong County Annals" written by Duan Yucai,

a Qing Dynasty Sinologist, it is stated: "Silkworms are most prosperous in Shu, hence the silk is called 'Shu silk,' and Shu itself means 'silkworm'" (Duan, 1878). In oracle bone script, the character "蜀" is a pictograph of a silkworm. Sichuan, historically known as "Shu" or "Shu State" and "Land of Silkworms," is associated with the legend of the first ancient Shu king, Cancong. He is said to be the incarnation of the "Shu" (wild silkworm), characterized by protruding eyes (longitudinal eyes). This is recorded in "Huayang Guo Zhi·Shu Zhi": "There was a Shu lord named Cancong, with longitudinal eyes" (Zhao, 2001; Zhu et al., 2019). The longitudinal-eyed human face figurine unearthed at the Sanxingdui site in Guanghan corroborates the legend of Cancong's "longitudinal eyes." Cancong's daughter, Lei Zu, wife of the Yellow Emperor, is credited as the inventor who domesticated wild silkworms, historically known as "Lei Zu, the beginner of sericulture" (Hao & Travelling, 2014).



Figure 1: Map of Sichuan

4.2 The Change of the Social Life of Shu Embroidery Under Different Historical Background

Shu embroidery, to a significant extent, chronicles the historical and cultural transformations of the Sichuan region. Its culture, expression, and characteristics have been shaped during every period of Sichuan's history. Within the trajectory of historical and cultural development, there are three distinct phases that have had a profound impact on the culture of Shu embroidery.

4.2.1 Stage One: Ancient Shu Sanxingdui Civilization to Late Qing Dynasty (Emergence to Prosperity)

This phase marks the evolution of Shu embroidery from its inception to a state of flourishing. The development of Shu embroidery can be traced back to the Sanxingdui period. In 1986, a 2.6-meter-tall, 180-kilogram bronze standing figure was unearthed at the Sanxingdui site in the Chengdu Plain of Sichuan. Experts hypothesize that the decorative patterns on the figure's garment, possibly embroidered with Shu techniques, depict dragon motifs that might signify a mystical communion with deities, suggesting the garment could have been a shaman's robe (Jin & Lv, 1996). During this period, societal structures likely exhibited distinct hierarchical differences, and religious beliefs and rituals were integral to the civilization, infusing Shu embroidery patterns with a rich blend of mysticism and religion. In the Qin and Han Dynasties, Shu embroidery was renowned, with the Han emperor establishing a specialized "Jin Guan" (Silk Office) in Chengdu for its management. The earliest documentation of Shu embroidery appears in Yang Xiong's "Fu on the Capital of Shu," which uses "fluttering brocade and embroidery" to depict the splendid scene of Shu. This indicates that Shu embroidery was not only favored by the upper society as a luxury but also revered as a cultural symbol, playing an important role in ritual language and ceremonial occasions. During the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the advent of Buddhism in China introduced embroidered Buddhist images (Shen et al., 1989). Influenced by the rise of the Southern Silk Road, Shu embroidery's style was affected by Western Region textile embroideries, leading to more creative design patterns. By the Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties, particularly during the Tang Dynasty, Shu embroidery reached its zenith, exemplified by Li Bai's poem "Golden windows with embroidered draperies, pearl curtains hanging on silver hooks." (Yang et al., 2003). The court also established the "Wen Xiu Yuan" (Embroidery Institute) for the recruitment and training of embroidery artisans. During this period, embroidery became a leisure and creative activity for ladies born in rich families, forming the concept of "Gui Xiu" (ladies' embroidery). In the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the indulgent lifestyle of emperors greatly increased the demand for embroidery, significantly stimulating the development of Shu embroidery. The pinnacle technique of Shu embroidery, double-sided embroidery, began to emerge. The "Complete Annals of Arts and Culture in Shu" from the Song Dynasty records, "Sichuan was wealthy, producing silk and brocade. People made ice embroidery and other items, which were known as the best in the world". During the Ming Dynasty, silk and satin from Sichuan were highly

reputed for their quantity and quality. The Hongwu era saw the establishment of a "Weaving and Dyeing Bureau" in Sichuan, with various categories of craftsmen including embroiderers (Wei, 1973). In the middle and late Ming Dynasty, the emergence of the urban citizen class and early signs of capitalism led to Shu embroidery truly permeating the social lives of the masses (Ge, 1993). Following the mid-Qing Dynasty, Shu embroidery gradually formed into a distinct industry, with county governments establishing "Quan Gong Ju" (Encouragement of Industry Bureaus) to promote its production.



Figure 2: Bronze Standing Figure (Source: Photographed by Zheng Yuting, October 5, 2023)



Figure 3: Ming Dynasty Embroidered Robe of Qin Liangyu



Figure 4: Qing Dynasty Shu Embroidery Pillowcase and Bed Valance

4.2.2 Stage Two: Early Republic of China to the Establishment of the People's Republic of China (Slow Development to Stagnation)

In the early days of the Republic of China, following the Revolution of 1911 which overthrew the feudal dynasty, the old clothing system was abolished, and the production of court items for imperial worship ceased. Consequently, Shu embroidery products shifted towards more public-oriented daily use items. During this period, everyday items, such as embroidered clothes, quilt covers, pillowcases, bedspreads, longevity clothes, and longevity pillows, constituted a significant portion of the production. These products also included decorative and ornamental items. With internal national strife, lack of market regulation, and inflation, the demand for quilt covers surged. Unscrupulous businessmen, seeking exorbitant profits, resorted to producing inferior goods, employing cheap rural embroidery workers and it forced many professional embroiderers to abandon their craft. By the eve of the establishment of the People's Republic of China, only about ninety professional embroiderers remained. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Party and government placed great emphasis on the protection of folk crafts, actively supporting the production of Shu embroidery (Huang et al., 2011). In 1951, the Shu Embroidery Factory was established. However, just as Shu embroidery was thriving and developing vigorously, the ten-year cultural revolution devastated the craft, bringing it to the brink of extinction. From 1966 to 1972, a large number of Shu embroidery materials and designs were destroyed, the production of Shu embroidery came to a complete halt, factories were shut down, and workers were forced to change their professions.



Figure 5: Child Laborer Engaged in Embroidery

4.2.3 Reform and Opening Up to the Present (Revival of Shu Embroidery)

With the advent of the Reform and Opening Up policy, the Chinese government renewed its focus on Shu embroidery, leading to the reconstruction of the Shu Embroidery Factory and the reorganization of personnel to collate and summarize traditional embroidery techniques. This period saw the emergence of a host of masters in the art of Shu embroidery, including Peng Yongxing, Xiao Fuxing, Hao Shuping, Peng Shiping, Meng Dezhi, Yang Dequan, Wu Yuying, and Yuan Wei. These artisans not only preserved the traditional embroidery techniques and artistic styles of Shu embroidery but also researched new techniques, drawing on the strengths of other embroidery forms to continuously develop Shu embroidery's techniques and composition. By the 1950s, Shu embroidery had spread throughout Sichuan. In the late 1970s, almost every household in rural Western Sichuan engaged in embroidery, with the number of embroiderers reaching thousands. On May 20, 2006, Shu embroidery was inscribed on the first batch of the national list of intangible cultural heritage.



Figure 6: Shu Embroidery teacher instructing students in embroidery skills (Source: Shu Embroidery Cooperative)

At this time, Shu embroidery increasingly existed more as an art form than as a utilitarian item, satisfying people's spiritual needs. From the above we can see, initially, Shu embroidery was used for decoration and rituals, with patterns imbued with rich mystical and religious signs (Sima, 1982). Later, it evolved into a symbol of royal and noble identity and status, predominantly featuring dragon and phoenix motifs with increasingly delicate techniques (Duan, 1878). During the early stages of capitalism, as the urban citizen class emerged, Shu embroidery no longer served solely the royal and noble classes but also catered to the daily needs of the citizens (Qian & Watson, 1993). The trajectory of Shu embroidery—from its decline, through national revitalization efforts, to its resurgence—illustrates its transformation from a practical commodity to a cultural symbol. The patterns, techniques, and uses of Shu embroidery reflect the societal life and times in which they were created and practiced.

4.3 the Contemporary Transformation of Shu Embroidery

Shu embroidery represents a form of intangible cultural heritage characterized by vitality and fluidity, closely intertwined with our social life. Its genesis is rooted in the pursuit of beauty (Xueqin, 2007). Evolving over time, Shu embroidery has transcended its original role as a mere decorative element on fabrics. Its application scope and social function have undergone changes in response to societal development and transformation. In the context of modern societal progress, Shu embroidery has experienced several notable changes (Chang & Liu, 2007).

4.3.1 Expansion of New Themes

In February 2018, during his visit to Pixian District, Sichuan, General Secretary Xi Jinping, issued a significant directive regarding the national intangible cultural heritage of Shu embroidery. He emphasized the need for extensive research and design in terms of styles and patterns. He advocated for presenting Shu embroidery as a national gift, with the aim of promoting China's traditional intangible cultural heritage to the global stage.

(1) Preservation of Traditional Themes: The "Book of Documents - Yu Xia Book" records Emperor Shun's command to Yu the Great to "make garments" to demonstrate power across the lands: "I wish to observe the images of the ancients, the sun, the moon, the stars, mountains, dragons, splendid insects, to create a gathering; ancestral vessels, algae, fire, powdered rice, yellow and purple patterns, fine embroidery, using five colors to display on the five-colored garments, to make robes." (Ames,

1985). This passage established the system of "garments painted and skirts embroidered" for the Emperor's ceremonial robe with twelve ornamental designs. The symbolism and imagery used in these designs, such as the sun, moon, mountains, and rivers, to represent and imply imperial authority and the vastness of the realm, had a profound influence on the development of textile and embroidery pattern cultures in China and worldwide (Bevan & Wengrow, 2016). From related literature and documents, it is evident that the themes of Shu embroidery have always been based on traditional patterns widely recognized in folk culture for their auspicious and prosperous meanings. Animal, plant, landscape, and human subjects are the main decorative patterns in Shu embroidery, especially designs featuring giant pandas and golden snub-nosed monkeys, which are particularly popular with the public.



Figure 7: Shu embroidery works featuring a golden snub-nosed monkey and a panda

(2) Contemporary Art Themes Closely Aligned with the Times: Contemporary Shu embroidery exhibits a rich diversity of themes, continuing traditional motifs such as flowers, birds, landscapes, and figures while also incorporating a range of modern elements, thus reflecting contemporary characteristics and personalized creativity. It often combines with contemporary painting art, predominantly featuring modern oil painting themes. The saturated color palette of oil paintings harmonizes exquisitely with the texture of Shu embroidery. Chinese painting themes also blend well with Shu embroidery. Additionally, photography has become one of the most frequently represented subjects, aside from contemporary painting works. Shu embroidery is also in conjunction with real-time popular events, like the 2021 World University Games held in Chengdu, Sichuan. During the opening ceremony, guides held Shu embroidery guide signs designed and produced by Chinese arts and crafts master Hao Shuping, leading athletes into the stadium, symbolizing stepping onto the "Road of Blossom." The guide signs featured auspicious patterns of the returning (Hui) shape and Ruyi patterns, symbolizing good

fortune and longevity. The returning pattern originates from ancient pottery and bronze ware, while Ruyi, an object with a handle shaped like a finger for scratching, implies fulfillment of one's wishes. The top and bottom of the guide signs showcased the Great Wall pattern, also known as "Wan Bu Duan" (unbroken). Over time, the returning and Ruyi patterns have evolved and innovated into various styles, rich in aesthetic and cultural significance (Appadurai, 1988). The color coordination of embroidery threads not only tests the skill but also requires experience. When Hao Shuping embroidered the guide sign for the Chinese team, the two characters for "China" alone incorporated a set of three colors (Whitelegg, 2004). To make the characters more tridimensional, besides adding an extra layer of stitching, she also used grey-blue silk thread for edging. The completion of the entire guide sign involved 18 different colors (Veblen, 2017).



Figure 8: The 31st World University Games Shu Embroidery Guide Sign

(3) Customized Themes: The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective written by Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai, 1988) proposes that that things exist not just for being used; they reflect the feature, value and history of its society and culture. Individuals and groups in social life express their identity, social status, and cultural identification through the selection, use, manufacture, and inheritance of things. Due to the unique nature of its materials and the complexity of its craftsmanship, Shu embroidery typically commands a high price, placing it beyond the everyday reach of ordinary citizens. For many, it remains an admired yet unattainable art form (Rathje, 1988). To expand its market, Shu embroidery should consider the majority of the middle class and general public. Product themes need to be diversified, encompassing both high-end and affordable, everyday items. Innovation is a core element of product design. By understanding market demands and targeting different demographics

based on contemporary design languages and aesthetics, traditional Shu embroidery can be creatively transformed (Belk, 1988). Shu embroidery should be deeply explored and redesigned according to market demand, which means integrating the traditional Shu embroidery with modern life, thus forming a diversified development pattern in the modern industry (Appadurai, 1988). For instance, designing trendy embroidered jackets for young people with a choice of 8 different IP (Intellectual Property) images, catering to the vibrant and youthful aesthetic preferences of this demographic. Additionally, expanding the range of product types, moving beyond traditional items like quilt covers and pillowcases, to designing smaller, more portable items like miniature screens, Shu embroidery silk scarves, and folding fans. These items, with their simple yet meaningful designs, align with contemporary aesthetic preferences. Finally, expanding the product range to include festival-specific items can cater to the festive atmosphere and align with modern consumer habits, offering limited edition products for different holidays.



Figure 9: "Honor of Kings" Champion Robe

4.3.2 Innovation in Pattern Techniques

In the article "Development of Traditional Handicrafts in the New Era," Mr. Puan Guo pointed out: "The development of any traditional handicraft is aimed at meeting the needs of today's consumers or users. Contemporary Shu embroidery skills should be revitalized to bring Shu embroidery back to life itself, reflecting its value in life" (Pu Anguo, 1994). Feng Lei from Beijing University of Technology, in her thesis "Design and Implementation of a Virtual Shu Embroidery Art Gallery," digitally designed and implemented exhibition scenes for Shu embroidery. The digital research on Shu embroidery art has gained attention, with contemporary digital technology being widely applied in various fields of social development. The virtual reproduction of Shu embroidery skills is

an important avenue for the inheritance and development of Shu embroidery (Feng Lei, 2016). Research on the virtual reproduction of Shu embroidery skills involves using contemporary high-definition digital collection, surveying, and analysis processing technology to obtain primary data on Shu embroidery heritage resources. Computer equipment is then used to virtually simulate and realize the reproduction of embroidery works, providing new explorations and attempts for the digital preservation, dissemination, and display of intangible cultural heritage. Utilizing AI as a design aid, computer vision and image recognition technologies are employed to analyze traditional Shu embroidery patterns and designs, offering designers more inspiration and creativity regarding Shu embroidery. For instance, AI can learn from historical Shu embroidery patterns to generate new design suggestions. Additionally, based on customers' personalized needs, AI algorithms can create customized Shu embroidery designs. This involves learning about customers' tastes and preferences to provide designs that better align with their expectations.

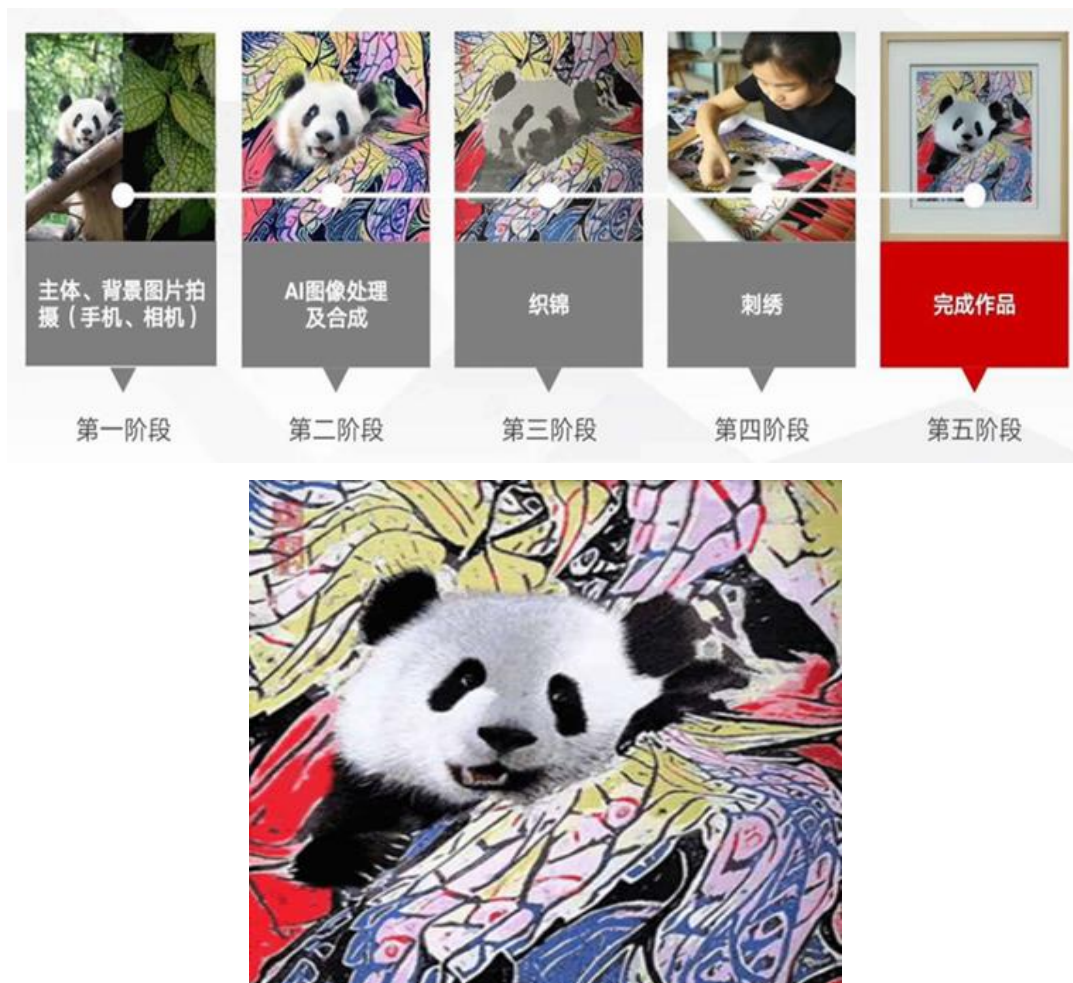


Figure 10: Steps in the Creation of AI-Designed Brocade Works (Source: Shujing Cultural Communication Company)

4.3.3 Innovation in Materials

Traditional Shu embroidery mainly employs silk threads derived from silkworms, because silk is an animal protein fiber known for its smoothness, softness, and high luster. This attribute allows for the creation of embroidery designs with varied colors and realistic, three-dimensional effects, forming one of the distinctive features of Shu embroidery. Traditionally, natural silk threads are used on silk or other fabrics for embroidery. In contemporary Shu embroidery, pre-existing artworks (paintings, prints, dyed fabrics) can be further processed and embroidered upon. This combination of embroidery and printing significantly reduces costs while enhancing artistic value. Moreover, innovation in the materials used for Shu embroidery threads includes the consideration of various special materials such as leather cords, lace, netting, sequins, gems, bright pieces, and metals. For instance, in embroidering certain animal or human subjects, gemstones can be used to depict the bright luster of eyes, not only rendering the pattern more lifelike but also increasing its collectible value. Leather materials can be cut and processed into thin cords to decorate specific parts of the embroidery, enhancing a modern, fashionable feel. Additionally, metallic threads have a strong photoreactivity, which can be utilized to depict the textural feel of certain parts of Shu embroidery products. Combining various materials in design is also an approach. The use of special threads innovates more artistic expressions of Shu embroidery, showcasing its charm in modern design.



Figure 11: Shu Embroidery Print-Embroidery Artwork (Source: Zheng Yuting, September 8, 2023, Photography)

4.3.4 Breakthroughs in Artistic Forms

According to Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai, 1988), the life of things refers to the process of its commodification, de-commodification, and the recycling between them. Shu embroidery has long been stereotypically perceived as a "traditional craft" in people's views, but in recent years, it has transformed into a modern art form. On March 25, 2013, Peng Liyuan visited the Tanzanian Women and Development Foundation and presented gifts, including the Shu embroidery work "Plum Blossoms and Double Bears." Shu embroidery art is no longer seen merely as a low-end handicraft. In recent years, it has frequently broken people's stereotypical impressions, presenting itself in a new artistic form across various domains, including routine foreign affairs or business gifts, everyday apparel (clothing design), and interior decorative art. These instances demonstrate the vitality and adaptability of Shu embroidery as a traditional craft in the modern era. Artists, through continuous experimentation and innovation, have found a balance between tradition and modern forms for Shu embroidery, injecting new life into this ancient craft. Furthermore, in an era that internet develops rapidly, Shu embroidery culture radiates its charm in another form. The 2018 widely popular TV series "Story of Yanxi Palace," whether in terms of the actors' costumes or the plot, showcased elements of Shu embroidery. The influencer Li Ziqi, under the guidance of Shu embroidery expert Meng Dezhi, documented her process of crafting an exquisite Shu embroidery garment. Her "YouTube Chinese Channel," garnered extensive international acclaim through faithful recordings of Chinese intangible cultural heritage skills. Young singer Li Yuchun incorporated "Shu Embroidery" into her song, spreading awareness of Shu embroidery culture to a broader audience. At this time, Shu embroidery is no longer predominantly used for practical items but exists as an art form, satisfying people's spiritual and cultural needs.



Figure 12: Shu Embroidery presented as a state gift



Figure 13: Presentation of Shu Embroidery in the internet, TV series, and songs

4.3.5 Novel Approaches to Dissemination and Promotion

Things and material objects are not only a part of social life, but also an important means of expressing social and cultural significance." Thomas J. Schlereth (1985) emphasized the importance of efforts by governments, schools, and businesses to promote wider recognition and inheritance of Shu embroidery in contemporary society.

(1) Establishment of Shu Embroidery Institute: In March 2018, the Anjing Street Office initiated the establishment of the Anjing Shu Embroidery Institute, adopting a joint school-building and standardized school-running model. The teachers primarily comprises national and provincial level experts of intangible cultural heritage, along with university professors. The institute recruits Shu embroidery-lovers from the public, offering professional skills training focused on Shu embroidery cultural knowledge, embroidery techniques, art fundamentals, color coordination, artwork appreciation, and product innovation design. Each training phase spans three months, after which successful candidates may be channeled into Shu embroidery enterprises, thereby increasing employment rates and nurturing new talent in Shu embroidery. Additionally, the Shu Embroidery Institute serves as a place for Shu embroiderers to enhance their skills. The crafts and arts industry requires continuous learning and improvement, not only in craft techniques but also in artistic fundamentals and cultivation. The institute organizes annual advanced training classes aimed at promoting the artistic cultivation of embroiderers, covering topics like art fundamentals, color coordination, and art appreciation, with classes tailored to different skill levels. Furthermore, the Shu Embroidery Institute has established long-term cooperation with Chengdu Textile College. Through national art funds and special funds, the college can operate professional study and research classes at the Shu Embroidery Institute, with joint teaching by institute instructors. The main content of these

training programs includes art fundamentals, color coordination, and art appreciation.



Figure 14: Shu Embroidery Institute (Source: Zheng Yuting, September 8, 2023, Photography)

(2) Embroidery Activities: The Chengdu Municipal Government, in collaboration with the People's Government of Pixian District, Chengdu, has organized several embroidery expos to increase the influence of Shu embroidery culture. For instance, on October 13, 2023, the 8th China Chengdu International Festival of Intangible Cultural Heritage · Anjing International Embroidery Art Festival was inaugurated at the Anjing Shu Embroidery Cultural and Creative Park in Pixian District, Chengdu. A special exhibition area dedicated to "productive protection" was established during the event, featuring live skills demonstrations and product displays by over a thousand embroiderers and weavers. This initiative significantly bridged the gap between intangible cultural heritage and the public and received praise from United Nations officials and experts in intangible cultural heritage, becoming a distinctive feature of the heritage festival.



Figure 15: Embroidery Expo Event (Source: Zheng Yuting, October 13, 2023, Photography)

Participating in international exhibitions and collaborating with global fashion icons is another activity. For example, the "2019 Chengdu International Intangible Heritage Renewal Plan - Craftsmanship Creating the Future," hosted by the Cultural and Education Section of the British Consulate-General, featured a four-week collaboration between British artist Odette Steele and national intangible cultural heritage inheritor and Shu embroidery master Meng Dezhi. They infused contemporary design into traditional intangible heritage, bringing innovation to the content and form. Similarly, on September 17, 2021, a two-day event titled "Art on Shu Embroidery Needle" was held in Chengdu's Wangfujing and MixC malls. It was jointly hosted by Shulongxiu Manor, an intangible cultural heritage institution, along with international brands Cartier and Gucci. This event, using Shu embroidery as a medium, built a bridge for cultural communication between China and the world.



Figure 16: Collaboration between Meng Dezhi and Odette Steele

(3) Shu Embroidery into Primary and Secondary schools: To promote the integration of traditional crafts into the quality education of primary and secondary schools, create a campus environment rich in traditional culture, spark students' interest in excellent traditional culture, preserve cultural roots, and cultivate inheritors and promoters of Chinese culture in the new era, in June 2022, the Chengdu Education Bureau and Chengdu University's Institute of Traditional Crafts jointly established a hundred-school alliance. This initiative, adopting a "specialist guidance + basic education + artisan teaching" approach, systematically and scientifically integrates traditional crafts into the primary and secondary school curriculum, forming a group of traditional craft courses. Shu embroidery, with a thousand years of history, is a significant treasure of Tianfu culture. To pass down Shu embroidery culture, school-based special courses are designed to educate students about the history, cultural background, and basic embroidery techniques of Shu embroidery. The teaching of Shu

embroidery culture to students is carried out in a "general education + advanced training" way. On one hand, through lectures and intangible cultural heritage inheritors in the classroom, students learn about the history, current development, and both historical and contemporary value of Shu embroidery during the learning process. On the other hand, various teaching methods are utilized to focus on cultivating students' inquiry skills. Students are also organized to visit museums and craft workshops for field trips and hands-on experiences. Shu embroidery art exhibitions and competitions are held to encourage students to showcase their embroidery works. The goal is to foster interest and understanding of traditional culture among primary and secondary school students while preserving and promoting Shu embroidery, a valuable cultural heritage.



Figure 17: Research team investigating at Jiaozier Primary School (Source: Zheng Yuting, October 28, 2022, Photography)

(4) Shu Embroidery into Communities: To enable the public to experience, perceive, and appreciate Shu embroidery, integrate it into everyday life, enhance the cultural literacy of community residents, and actively contribute to the inheritance of traditional skills and the promotion of Chinese culture, while also creating employment opportunities and strengthening community cohesion, the Chengdu Municipal Government has initiated a series of brand activities such as "Chengdu Handcraft" and "Phoenix Learning Arts." With support from the Hehuachi International Trade City Management Committee and the Fenghuangshan sub-district Office in Jinniu District, the China-ASEAN College of Arts at Chengdu University conducts the non-profit "Phoenix Learning Arts" traditional craft study for the public. Under the guidance of instructors from the

Institute of Traditional Crafts and intangible cultural heritage inheritors, courses like "Shu Embroidery" are offered. Rooted in the rich historical content of Shu embroidery, the focus is on the cultural inheritance and design innovation of Shu embroidery, fully integrating weaving and embroidery with modern technology to bring Shu embroidery into people's lives.



Figure 18: Phoenix Learning Arts Shu Embroidery Experience (Source: Zheng Yuting, December 17, 2022, Photography)



Figure 19: Chengdu Handcraft Intangible Heritage Experience Project (Source: Zheng Yuting, May 13, 2023, Photography)

The Chengdu Handcraft Intangible Heritage Inheritance Experience, led by leaders from the Chengdu Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, and Chengdu Tourism Investment Group, in collaboration with national and provincial intangible cultural heritage representatives, has established nearly 20 intangible heritage experience centers in major tourist attractions and commercial areas in Chengdu, such as Anren Ancient Town and Dongmen Market. Through these methods,

Shu embroidery has become a part of community culture, providing residents with more opportunities to participate and learn, while also promoting the inheritance and development of traditional crafts.

4.3.6 Summary

In contemporary society, the traditional handicraft Shu embroidery is undergoing several transformations to adapt to modern market and cultural demands. These changes include the expansion of new themes, innovation in pattern techniques and materials, breakthroughs in artistic forms, and novel approaches to dissemination and promotion. Such evolutions indicate that Shu embroidery is actively adapting to contemporary societal needs, incorporating innovation and modern elements while maintaining its traditional essence. This is crucial for ensuring the inheritance of Shu embroidery and enhancing its role in contemporary culture. On one hand, some traditional crafts and designs are preserved and passed down to maintain the cultural tradition of Shu embroidery. On the other hand, artists and designers are merging Shu embroidery with modern elements as much as possible, creating novel and creative works. This integration helps to attract a broader audience and keeps Shu embroidery vibrant in the contemporary art and handicraft market. Additionally, the development of contemporary technology has infused new vitality into Shu embroidery. Most importantly, the continuous support from the Chengdu government and Shu embroidery enterprises has provided comprehensive assistance for its dissemination and promotion, making Shu embroidery more contemporary. This helps to attract a wider range of consumers and renders Shu embroidery more practical and fashionable in contemporary society. Overall, Shu embroidery has experienced several transformations in contemporary society. It is a multifaceted process that respects the characteristics and history of traditional Shu embroidery while innovatively and flexibly responding to the needs and changes of contemporary society. These transformations ensure that Shu embroidery maintains a significant influence in modern culture and markets.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper primarily focuses on Shu embroidery art as the subject of study. By examining the history of Shu embroidery, it explores the relationship between Shu embroidery and the social life of things in the Sichuan region, contemplating its role and function in the context of new

societal backgrounds. This leads to revelations about the role transformation and aesthetic evolution of contemporary Shu embroidery art in human societal development. The study has drew the following:

The research, centered on Shu embroidery art and employing the concept of "the social life of things," systematically analyzes the history of Shu embroidery, understanding the social life of objects in the Sichuan region and exploring the spirit of the region as represented by Shu embroidery. Building on the concept of "the social life of things," the study establishes a cultural system of the historical development of Shu embroidery. This aids in better exploring the development and innovation of Shu embroidery in contemporary cultural life, and delineating its development characteristics and artistic innovation in contemporary socio-economic contexts. Thus, this research can provide a reference for other researchers using the same concept and offer a model for future studies, contributing insights for the sustainable development of Shu embroidery art and other traditional crafts and fine arts. Researching the artistic characteristics and market performance of contemporary Shu embroidery art helps to clarify the future direction of the Shu embroidery industry. Practicality and aesthetics are the two main functions of Shu embroidery art. Even in contemporary times, the absence of either aspect could lead to an imbalance in its development, thereby endangering the survival of the craft. In the rapidly developing Shu embroidery industry, analyzing and summarizing experiences from a historical perspective and rationally considering the future direction and specific ways of inheritance for Shu embroidery art are crucial. Analyzing the development patterns of contemporary Shu embroidery art enlightens the contemporary regeneration and application of the entire traditional handicraft industry. Furthermore, understanding how governments and enterprises act in the inheritance, transmission, and protection of Shu embroidery, and how to maintain its robust development vitality in contemporary times, can provide practical guidance for the entire traditional handicraft industry.

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