

# Research on the Innovative Design of Suzhou Embroidery Craft in Tourist Souvenirs under the Background of Wu Culture

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## Abstract

Wu culture, as a brilliant component of Chinese civilization, gave birth to Suzhou embroidery, a unique handicraft treasure. Suzhou embroidery not only carries a profound historical and cultural heritage, but also has been recognized as an intangible cultural heritage, showing outstanding artistic value. This study deeply discusses the innovative application of Suzhou embroidery technology in tourist souvenirs under the background of Wu culture, and systematically analyzes the historical background, artistic characteristics and current situation of Suzhou embroidery in the tourist souvenir market. Through the comprehensive use of literature research, field investigation, in-depth interview and other qualitative and quantitative research methods, this study excavates the cultural significance, artistic characteristics and market value of Suzhou embroidery. The research results show that integrating the unique value of Wu culture into the design of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs can not only effectively improve the cultural connotation and market competitiveness of the products, but also enhance the cultural identity and emotional experience of consumers. This study provides a theoretical and practical basis for the inheritance and development of Suzhou embroidery craft, as well as a useful reference for the modernization and innovative development of other intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Wu Culture, Suzhou Embroidery, Tourist Souvenirs, Cultural Inheritance, Innovative Design

## 1. Introduction

Suzhou embroidery, as an important symbol of Wu culture, has a long history and exquisite skills. It is one of the four famous embroideries in China. It originated in the Wuxian area of Suzhou, and with the evolution of history, it gradually spread to Wuxi, Changzhou and other places, forming a unique regional characteristics of embroidery art system. Suzhou embroidery is not only famous for its beautiful patterns, exquisite ideas and meticulous

embroidery work, but also contains rich cultural connotation and aesthetic value, which has become an indispensable part of Wu culture.

In the tide of globalization and modernization, traditional culture is facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities. As the representative of Chinese excellent traditional culture, the inheritance and development of Wu culture is particularly important. As the treasure of Wu culture, Suzhou embroidery is the core issue of this study. How to integrate modern design concept into tourist souvenirs while maintaining the essence of tradition? This study will systematically sort out the historical background, artistic characteristics and the current situation of Suzhou embroidery in the tourist souvenir market, and explore a new path to realize the inheritance and development of "Wu culture" in contemporary times by deeply exploring the unique value of Wu culture in history, culture, religion and other aspects. At the same time, this study will also combine the market trend and consumer demand, put forward the strategies and methods of innovative design of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs, inject new vitality into the inheritance and development of Suzhou embroidery craft.

### **1.1 Research Objective**

This research aims to deeply explore the living inheritance and innovative expression of "Wu culture", integrate "Wu culture" elements into the research project of Su embroidery tourist souvenir design, explore the origin, context and elemental characteristics of "Wu culture", and demonstrate the profound heritage and charm of "Wu culture" through the traditional handicraft of Su embroidery.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **1. Research on Suzhou embroidery skills**

From 1992 to 2023, a total of 153 documents were retrieved on CNKI with the keyword "Suzhou embroidery design", among which Suzhou embroidery skills, Suzhou embroidery works of art, Suzhou embroidery innovation and other keywords ranked the top three. Meanwhile, traditional culture inheritance, modern design integration and other keywords also appeared frequently. It reveals that the research hotspots in the field of Suzhou embroidery design in recent years focus on the combination of innovation and tradition. In view of the fact that Suzhou embroidery is the representative title of Su embroidery, there are a total of 35 literatures on "Su embroidery". In addition, from the perspective of the number of documents and the analysis of high-frequency keywords, the current literature research on Suzhou embroidery in China is diversified, but it is especially concentrated in the design and application of Suzhou embroidery skills and Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs showing Wu culture, which indicates that the current research on Suzhou embroidery has an urgent need to promote its skill inheritance and industrial innovation and development.

Suzhou embroidery is one of the traditional crafts in Suzhou area. It originated in Wuxian County of Suzhou and has spread to Wuxi, Changzhou and other regions. Suzhou embroidery is one of the four famous Chinese embroideries (Suzhou embroidery, Hunan embroidery, Guangdong embroidery and Shu embroidery) established in the Qing Dynasty. It has a strong

regional characteristic due to its beautiful patterns, exquisite ideas, meticulous embroidery work and unpredictable stitching. As early as 2006, it was included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list.

Figure 1: Suzhou embroidery "Cat"



Source: <http://www.gooogu.cn/Article/sxdbzpyynxn.html> (Retrieved on March 10, 2024)

## 2. The history of Suzhou embroidery

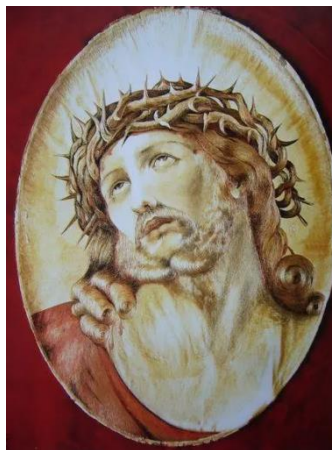
The term "Su embroidery" is not ancient. It was born out of the common embroidery technique in Wu County. In the long development process of thousands of years, it was finally formed in the Ming and Qing Dynasties through the infiltration of Wu culture, the influence of painting art, the integration of various embroidery techniques and other factors. "Su Embroidery" originally only refers to the embroidery products produced locally in Suzhou, developed to "the general term of embroidery products centered in Suzhou", and then to "hand-made silk products of Wu place centered in Suzhou". While its scope has gradually expanded, its connotation has also been continuously improved in this development process. Professor Sun Peiran, an expert in Su embroidery research, added in her book "Su Embroidery in Wu Di" that the geographical scope of Wu Di should be "Taihu Lake as the heart, Shanghai and Nanjing as the first, Suzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou and Zhenjiang as the trunk, Hangzhou, Jiaxing and Huzhou as the limbs, and a regional total around Nantong and Yangzhou", that is, the current academic circle called "Dawu Culture". Although this definition expands the geographical scope of Su embroidery, there are still some limitations. According to Sun Peilan's point of view, the author believes that Su embroidery should refer to the general term of embroidery products with Suzhou as the center and the use of Su embroidery needle technique and artistic characteristics in the region of Wu. Therefore, the branches of Su embroidery, including Gu embroidery in Shanghai, Shen embroidery in Nantong, regular embroidery in Changzhou, Xi embroidery in Wuxi and Baoying embroidery in Yangzhou, should be included in the category of Su embroidery art.

2.1 The formative period of traditional Su embroidery: The natural ecological conditions such as the weather and the atmosphere of the earth are the important basis for the pursuit of beauty and craftsmanship. Suzhou has a superior geographical environment in the South of the Yangtze River. Since ancient times, the land is fertile, the climate is mild, the sericulture is developed, especially the developed silk weaving industry has created superior material

conditions for the development of embroidery. As early as the Stone Age, spinning wheels, bone needles and fabrics appeared in Suzhou, which provided essential material guarantee for the emergence and development of embroidery in Suzhou. For example, the fabric fragments unearthed from the Caoshoe Mountain site in Suzhou mentioned above mean that material conditions for embroidery were initially available here 6,000 years ago.

The early record of embroidery in Suzhou appeared in Liu Xiang's *Shuoyuan* in the Han Dynasty: "Minister Ping of Jin hired Wu, and Wu people wiped the boat to reverse it, with five hundred people on the left and five hundred on the right, those who had embroidered clothes and leopard fur, and those who had brocade clothes and fox fur." According to the verification, the reign of Ping Gong of Jin lasted from 557 to 532 B.C., so it can be seen that in the Spring and Autumn Period of Wu more than 2,000 years ago, the nobility and the rich and other upper-class society had already worn brocade embroidery in their daily clothing. In addition, in the first local history of Suzhou written by Zhao Ye in the Han Dynasty, the embroidery process was also mentioned many times, such as "Wu Yue Spring and Autumn Volume Six - The Legend of King Yue" : "Yu was climbing a mountain, raising his face to the sky and whistling, suddenly lying down. Because he dreamed of a man dressed in red embroidery, he claimed to be Xuanyi Cangshui Messenger "; "Wuyue Spring and Autumn Volume Five · Fucha Internal Biography" : "The king of Wu is about to Fu Jian... I wish to repeat the three pieces of Luo embroidery, think it is hidden." In addition, such as the "Three kingdoms · Wu Shu · Jiang Qin biography" : "wives and concubines clothes, all know the beautiful"; In the biography of The Three Kingdoms · Wu Shu · Hua Fu: "women's outstanding ornaments", "embroidered clothes 黼 in imitation", "wife and concubine clothes, Xi all beautiful" and so on. These historical materials are enough to let us see that embroidery decoration clothing had become popular at that time, confirming that embroidery skills had developed to a certain degree in Suzhou during The Three Kingdoms period, and reached the integration of practicality and decoration in clothing.

*Figure 2: Suzhou embroidery "Jesus, the Savior of the World"*



Source: <https://www.xncsb.cn/baike/310189.htm> (Retrieved on March 10, 2024)

With the development of embroidery in Suzhou area, its artistry is also improving. In the Southern and Northern Dynasties, religious painting became the main category in the field of painting art, and the landscape painting school also began to take shape. The rapid development of painting art, on the one hand, provided a wealth of embroidery manuscripts for embroidery, on the other hand, it also objectively put forward higher requirements for embroidery skills. Lock embroidery was the main stitching method from the Western Zhou Dynasty, the Warring States Period to the two Han Dynasties. In order to embroider religious Buddha statues and Buddha statues at that time, new stitching methods such as velvet embroidery and knot embroidery came into being, and "the complicated and vivid stitching method of velvet and wrong stitching gradually replaced the lock silk embroidery handed down for thousands of years and got a new development, laying the foundation of Gu embroidery and Su embroidery in Ming Dynasty".

2.2 The heyday of traditional Su embroidery: Ming and Qing dynasties were the heyday of feudal society in China. Social productive forces continued to develop, the national arts and crafts unprecedented prosperity. According to "Gu Xiukao" and Suzhou "Jin Wen Gong Gu Temple inscription" records: Gu Mingru and his brother Gu Mingshi in Shanghai "nine mu land", "build garden to enjoy the old", wear the pool to get a stone, there are Zhao Wenmin hand seal Lu Xiang garden three words, so the name of Lu Xiang garden. "Besides wine, he taught his family embroidering, dividing silk and breaking wisp, poor and exquisite; According to the landscape figures, as vivid. So the name of Gu Xiu became popular with the world." Han Ximeng is the representative of Gu embroidery, she is proficient in six methods, fine brush flowers, embroidery to the Song Dynasty, Yuan famous painting embroidery pattern as a copy, the use of painting theory, embroidery biological charm is vivid, she also according to the fine brush painting of the artistic characteristics of the dye to create a fine and needle method, solve the problem of copying fine brush painting and color level, so that embroidery to the realistic direction of simulation a big step forward. It laid the foundation for Shen Shou to create "simulation embroidery".

2.3 Transition period of traditional Suzhou embroidery: Before the Opium War, China's feudal society had been in a self-sufficient economic state. The production of Suzhou embroidery also mainly met the needs of the feudal ruling class for luxury life. After the Opium War in 1840, the country was opened to the outside world, and the Western ideology was introduced. Due to the exchange of Chinese and foreign handicraft culture and the opening of overseas markets, China's handicraft arts were obviously influenced by foreign cultures. Suzhou embroidery is no exception. It has undergone fundamental changes on the basis of tradition.

Figure 3: Suzhou embroidery "Pine and Crane Longevity"



Source: <https://www.susoul.com/zqyshyn.html> (Retrieved on March 10, 2024)

### 3. Foreign research on embroidery

Foreign studies on Chinese embroidery are mostly from the perspectives of art anthropology and feminology to analyze the important role of embroidery in women's social life, such as the book "Boudoir Tutor of the Tutor" written by American scholar Gao Yanyi. The book "Jiangnan Talented Female Culture in the late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties" proposes that embroidery and other "female red" is a kind of cultural survival mode created by women in the Confucian system of male-dominated society, and has important social significance for women. Alois Riegl's *A Matter of Style: The Basis of Decorative History* attributed the pattern art to the product of human spiritual activities and put forward concept of "artistic will"; Susanne K. anger's *The Problem of Art* is an important representative work of semiotic aesthetics, and its theoretical connotation of the proposition that "art is the creation of the symbolic form of human emotion" is of great significance to study of the symbols of folk embroidery patterns.

### 4. Overview of Wu culture

It can be divided into pre-Wu culture, Wu State culture and post-Wu culture. The remains of late Paleolithic Period were found on Sanshan Island in Taihu Lake, which shows that there were signs of human activities here 10,000 years ago, and also shows the integration of Wu culture with Majiabang culture, Songze culture and Liangzhu culture in the Neolithic Age. The earliest irrigation system of rice fields in China at that time was found here, forming the early Xianwu culture and also the foundation of Wu culture. In late Shang Dynasty, Taibo Benwu established the Juwu culture, which was integrated with Central Plains culture and Jingman culture, and then integrated into the ancient culture of Wudi to form the middle Wu culture. History is constantly updated, culture continues to blend, Wu culture evolved into today's Wu culture, this culture is the positive inheritance and steady development of the previous Wu culture. Han Dynasty is an important turning point, Wu culture completed the transformation from "Yi culture" to Han culture, and became a regional culture in Han culture.

Figure 4: Introduction of Taibo Ben Wu Event in Meili Site Museum, Wuxi City



Source: Author

### 3. Research Methodology

This research adopts qualitative research method and comprehensive use of literature research, field investigation, in-depth interview and other descriptive analysis methods to deeply explore Suzhou embroidery craft under the background of Wu culture and its application in design of tourist souvenirs. The specific research methods are as follows:

#### 1. Research framework establishment and scope focus

The researcher first clarified the research framework and focused the research scope on Suzhou embroidery craft under the background of Wu culture and its combination with the design of tourist souvenirs. Through field investigation and in-depth investigation, taking the embroidery craft of Suzhou and its surrounding areas as an example, from the unique perspective of regional culture, the potential combination of embroidery craft and tourist souvenir design is preliminarily explored.

#### 2. Phase of data collection

Literature research method: Based on research topic, by searching different keywords, the relevant literature is consulted in the CNKI database, and books in related fields at home and abroad are extensively read, so as to comprehensively understand concept, application status and application rules of the concept of perception and experience in design. At the same time, search for papers related to craft culture creative design, to understand the research methods and systematic design ideas in this field.

Field study method: The researchers visited embroidery workshops, museums, tourist souvenir markets and related enterprises and designers in Zhenhu Town of Suzhou in depth to extract the elements of traditional craft culture of Suzhou embroidery. Through the actual investigation, the production process, cultural feelings and market demand of embroidery technology were recorded in detail.

Interview method: Selected practitioners, inheritors and consumers closely related to Suzhou embroidery as interviewees, conducted in-depth interviews, and extensively exchanged the historical origin, technical characteristics, market demand and current situation of innovative design of Suzhou embroidery.

Questionnaire survey method: Questionnaires were designed and distributed to collect a wider range of consumer cognition and preference data for Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs.

### **3. Data analysis**

Systematically collated and in-depth analyzed a large amount of collected literature, interview records, questionnaire data and field investigation data. Combined with the market trend and consumer demand, from the perspective of regional culture, this paper puts forward the strategies and methods of innovative design of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs. By summarizing the successful cases and practical experience, the application of embroidery elements in the design of tourist souvenirs is optimized to ensure the practicability and feasibility of the design strategy.

Additionally, the study employed integrative analysis methods for qualitative data, using qualitative analysis software to process and analyze responses to open-ended questions. This assisted in coding and theme extraction, combining qualitative insights with quantitative analysis results to achieve a more comprehensive research perspective.

## **4. Research Results**

### **1. Production methods of contemporary Suzhou embroidery**

*Table 1: Suzhou embroidery production methods*

<b>Serial No.</b>	<b>Method of production</b>	<b>Content</b>
1	Press flap	Refers to the embroidery appreciation of patterns or overlap, without water layers of phase pressure of a kind of embroidery, its role is to make the intersection of patterns without gaps and levels clear. When embroidering, first embroider the object far behind, the stitch should cross the outline of the front pattern, and then embroider the front pattern near a layer. The stitch of the outline edge should be homogeneous and dense to distinguish the front and back layers. If the two objects before and after the color is the same, the color of the object phase pressure after the embroider must be slightly deeper to set off, so that the object has the sense of overlap.
2	Unstitch	One of the embroidery production processes. After embroidering the pattern on the face, the embroidered finished product is taken off the face and called "falling face". The method of the real goods falling is to relax the stretching line, remove the stretching bamboo, remove the stretching needle, exit the stretching latch, pull out the white cloth, remove the sewing line of the embroidery ground and the stretching cloth, and remove the embroidery products; Appreciate the goods need to be framed and then stretched, otherwise it will affect the quality of embroidery.
3	Edging	For the stitching of skin embroidery, the first skin is called "edge out", that is, the first skin on the edge of the object.
4	silky	Refers to the direction in which the embroidery lines are arranged. Embroidery is mainly expressed by lines, and silk plays a key role in expressing the concave and convex turning of objects and the rigid back. The arrangement of lines used in embroidery silk must be consistent with the growth direction of plant fiber tissue and animal hair, and must be flexibly used with their different gestures. If the flowers have positive, negative, bending, leaning posture, to correctly grasp the silk of the flowers, first of all to find out the overall center point and part of the center point of the embroidery pattern, as well as the relationship between the two. Part of the center



Serial No.	Method of production	Content
		must be toward the whole center. When embroidering, it is necessary to determine the direction of silk according to the center, so as to enhance the artistic performance of the embroidery.
5	Hide the needle	Where the pattern of radial or zigzag silk is embroidered, the short needle incorporated in the zigzag is called "hidden needle". Its role is to make the line silk turn natural, and make the embroidery surface plain.
6	Draw Old Thread	Use a rolling needle to make a circle of the pattern outline, and then embroider the line away so that the outline is slightly raised. The tradition is called "raising the old thread".
7	Leather ends	Refers to the level of embroidery produced in batches in each small embroidery unit, the jargon is called "leather head". In the snatch stitch and flat set stitch, the layer head is clear, also known as the skin head is clear.
8	Remembering the stitch	A term used in Suzhou embroidery as a substitute for tying knots in embroidery. When starting or finishing embroidery with one thread, several very short stitches are embroidered to hide the thread, which is called "jotting stitch" or "jotting thread".

Source: Author

## 2. Contemporary process of embroidery making in Suzhou

The production of Suzhou embroidery mainly includes eight basic processes: starting from design pattern, drawing draft to the upper stretch, the upper stretch, the wiring, the embroidery, the completion of creation of entire work, and then it is attached to corresponding products through some production processes, such as screens, decorations, daily necessities, and so on, and finally sold. Design pattern, that is, to draw content of idea, determine the line, shape and color, which is equivalent to design manuscript.

## 3. Geographical characteristics and development of Wu culture

The connotation and characteristics of Wu culture are mainly embodied in four aspects: water town culture, industry and commerce culture, scholar culture and elegant culture. Water town culture is the soul of Wu culture. Su embroidery, as the treasure of Wu culture, its delicate stitching and vivid patterns all reflect the soft beauty and harmony of water town culture.

Figure 5: Art work "Taihu Family"



Source: <https://www.artfoxlive.com/product/87394.html>

Industrial and commercial culture is the cornerstone of Wu culture's prosperity. Since ancient times, Suzhou has been an important city of commerce and trade, and the economic prosperity has provided a solid material foundation for the development of Suzhou embroidery. During The Three Kingdoms Period, the development of handicraft industry in

Wu-land promoted the improvement of Suzhou embroidery skills. In Song Dynasty, the prosperity of sericulture industry promoted the trend of Suzhou embroidery to be real and vivid, and ornamental embroidery came into being; In the Ming Dynasty, the social demand for embroidery products soared, and Su embroidery art expanded from ornamental embroidery to commodity field, forming a huge industrial scale.

The scholar culture is the concentrated embodiment of Wu cultural spirit. In history, Suzhou has attracted many scholars, intellectuals and beauties, who have left a rich cultural heritage here. The history of Suzhou embroidery is a microcosm of Wu culture. From the silk and hemp fabrics unearthed in Qianshanyang, to the high development of Suzhou embroidery techniques in the Qing Dynasty, to the depression of the embroidery industry in the Republic of China and the revival after liberation, Suzhou embroidery has always been closely related to the cultural changes in Wu. Generations of Su embroidery masters, such as CAI Qunxiu and Shen Ying, not only had excellent skills, but also made great contributions to the promotion and dissemination of Su embroidery, making Su embroidery a symbol of Wu culture.

Elegant culture is the unique aesthetic pursuit of Wu culture. Wudi people advocate elegance and pursue a delicate and delicate life style. This aesthetic concept is reflected in painting and calligraphy, crafts, clothing, food and other aspects. As the representative of Wudi arts and crafts, Su embroidery is a vivid portrayal of Wudi elegant culture with its elegant, delicate and exquisite style.

*Table 2: Development of Wudi culture*

<b>Periods</b>	<b>Features and Events</b>	<b>Cultural characteristics and influences</b>
770-476 BC Spring and Autumn Period to the formation of Wu State	Taibo Ben Wu Central Plains culture and Jiangnan indigenous culture fusion	Openness and inclusiveness are emerging. The characteristics of Wu culture were established
221 BC - 220 AD From the end of Warring States to the Eastern Han Dynasty (Low Tide and recovery)	In 333 BC, Chu defeated Yue Cultural transformation and economic recovery in the Eastern Han Dynasty Three external opportunities accelerated development (Yongjia Rebellion, An Shi Rebellion, Jingkang difficulty)	Cultural recovery and transformation. The advanced nature of regional culture increases
229-589 AD The Six Dynasties Period	Social development from Eastern Wu to Chen Dynasty. Culture and art grew and matured rapidly	Unique cultural and artistic features took shape. The art of music and dance had a profound influence on later generations
AD 618-1279 Tang and Song Dynasties	The southern part of the Song Dynasty became the political, economic and cultural center. In the middle and late Ming Dynasty, commerce, industry and culture prospered in Jiangnan	New development stage Culturally developed areas Academic and artistic centers were established
Modern	Innovative spirit and beyond self The spirit of "integration, innovation, pragmatism and Chongwen"	Important influence of contemporary society and culture. Core driving force of regional cultural development.

Source: Author



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