

Sino-Foreign Exchanges and the Evolution of Shu Brocade Art Style

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Abstract: *This paper explores the impact of Sino-foreign exchanges on the evolution of the artistic style of Shu brocade. In the pre-Tang era, Shu brocade was characterized by patterns of clouds and mythical creatures, complex layouts, and muted colors adhering to the traditional 'Five Colors' system. The prosperity of the Silk Road, along with population migration and political-cultural interactions, precipitated significant transformations. In terms of pattern, it was the incorporation of foreign plant and animal patterns, including distinctive designs like the linked-bead patterns and confronted animals. From the casual horizontal linear composition of the Han Dynasty to the geometrical composition with a sense of order in the Tang Dynasty, and finally to the diverse composition patterns where multiple composition methods coexist, some composition methods have become increasingly complex. Color palettes shifted under Western influences, moving from heavy, mysterious dark grounds to hues of high brightness and strong contrast, thus evolving from an archaic and solemn sacredness to a secular elegance. Ultimately, cultural exchange and technical updates drove this artistic formal change, fostering a continuous process of development and innovation through the fusion of Western styles with native traditions.*

Keywords: *Shu Brocade; Sino-Foreign Exchanges; Artistic Style; Patterns*

1. Introduction

In recent years, growing awareness of cultural diversity and heritage preservation has led to an increase in research on Shu brocade patterns in China. By examining historical documents, scholars have explored the profound cultural significance and artistic value embedded in Shu brocade. Some of the cultural exchanges from the perspective of the overall culture of Bashu, such as Duan Yu's Ancient Shu Civilization and Early Sino Indian Exchange, Bashu Ancient Civilization and the Southern Silk Road, as well as Tong Enzheng's On the Relationship between Ancient Sichuan and Southeast Asian Civilization and Yan Xin's Exploration of the External Relations of Ancient Shu on the Southern Silk Road, point out that the ancient Shu civilization had extensive cultural exchanges with Southeast Asian civilization, South Asian civilization, Near Eastern and European ancient civilizations, indicating that Bashu culture is an open cultural system that has made important contributions to the prosperity and development of ancient civilizations in the world. In a paper related to the exchange of Shu brocade culture, Duan Yu discussed in The Contribution of Ba Shu Silk to Ancient World Civilization the influence of Ba Shu silk products such as Shu brocade and Shu embroidery on world civilization through the Southern Silk Road, as well as the Northern Silk Road and Grassland Silk Road; Chen Airon's How to Make the Silk Road Smooth - The Past, Present, and Future of Shu Brocade on the Southern Silk Road sorted out the dissemination of Shu brocade through the Southern Silk Road, and analyzed the factors of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries presented in the patterns and dyeing of Shu brocade combined with unearthed cultural relics. According to Zhang Zengqi's analysis of the unearthed cultural relics in the Dianchi area during the Warring States period to the Western Han Dynasty, it is believed that India had contact with the Dian Kingdom in the Dianchi area as early as before Zhang Qian's mission to Daxia. These papers discuss the relationship between the Silk Road and Shu brocade, but they focus on cultural exchange on the Silk Road more, and Shu brocade is not the main research subject. Zhang Danqiu's Analysis of the Evolution of Shu Brocade Patterns in the Sui and Tang Dynasties in a Multicultural Environment, Yang Liuyi's Research on Han Jin Shu Brocade, Li Shili's Research on Silk Fabric Patterns Unearthed in the Dulan Region of Qinghai, Zhang Ke's Aesthetic Research on Shu Brocade Patterns in the Tang Dynasty and other papers study Shu brocade patterns in specific periods and locations, all of which bring rich materials. However, these studies have lacked systematic approaches and have not sufficiently focused on the stylistic and aesthetic features of Shu brocade in the context of cultural exchange pattern research. Meanwhile,

specialized research on Shu brocade patterns remains relatively limited abroad. Foreign scholars often approach Eastern art from a cross-cultural perspective, positioning Shu brocade patterns within the broader framework of Eastern artistic traditions and emphasizing their stylistic characteristics. Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been devoted to their artistic uniqueness and historical development from the standpoint of Sino-foreign cultural exchange.

A comprehensive review of the characteristics and evolution of Shu brocade patterns within the context of cultural exchange holds significant theoretical and practical value. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a deeper exploration of the historical status and value of Shu brocade patterns in cultural exchange, enriching and deepening our understanding of Shu brocade and traditional Chinese culture, and promoting Shu brocade both domestically and internationally. Secondly, from a practical perspective, in-depth research on Shu brocade patterns can provide innovative ideas and design inspirations for modern textile industry, clothing design, and related cultural industries, promoting the modern transformation and application of traditional culture.

2. The Traditional artistic features of Shu brocade before Sino-foreign exchanges

Shu brocade, generally referring to the traditional jacquard silk brocade produced in the Sichuan region of China (formerly known as Shu Land). It is one of the most famous brocades in Chinese history and is known as one of the "Four Great brocades of China" along with Nanjing Yun brocade, Suzhou Song brocade, and Guangxi Zhuang brocade. The weaving of Shu brocade is a complex traditional handicraft, with a wide range of pattern themes, clever ideas, and strong cultural connotations and characteristics of the times. The origin of Shu brocade can be traced back to the pre Qin period. During the Warring States period, silk weaving in Shu (present-day Chengdu, Sichuan) began to take shape. The Han Dynasty marked the first peak in the development of Shu brocade.

The patterns of Shu brocade prior to the Qin and Han dynasties can be categorized into two distinct types. Early textile compositions and designs were predominantly constrained by weaving techniques, primarily featuring simple geometric patterns. Few examples of ancient Shu brocade have survived; thus, our understanding largely relies on unearthed textiles from other regions, which include Hui character motifs and diamond patterns. In contrast, the Shu brocade from the Qin and Han dynasties exhibits a high degree of uniqueness. In terms of color palette, black, blue, green, red, yellow, and white serve as the primary hues. Regarding color composition, black and dark blue are frequently employed as background colors upon which vibrant shades such as yellow or green are layered alongside contrasting tones like yellow and white. This strong color contrast contributes to an overall style that is remarkably dynamic. Form-wise, continuous curves are often utilized for abstract representations characterized by movement and exaggeration—like the flowing contours of clouds and misty landscapes. The undulating forms of mountains, rivers, and clouds extend horizontally in an abstract manner through a cyclical arrangement while interspersed with highly stylized animal shapes that evoke a dreamlike quality. Content-wise, themes drawn from nature—including clouds, mountains, flowers—and various animal motifs such as birds, dragons, phoenixes, tigers, and leopards are prevalent. Additionally, some pieces also incorporate Chinese characters.

This artistic aesthetic has a certain relationship with the immortal culture of Shu. During this period, Shu brocade was more like an expression of sacred space, praying for good fortune and the heavens. Therefore, the background was an imaginary place where immortals lived in the sky, with clouds and mist in the sky, as well as high mountains and rivers. The text was the content of the prayers, such as hopes for longevity and descendants, wishes for immortality and seeking immortality, as well as blessings for historical events and social prosperity. The famous "Five Stars in the East Benefit China" brocade arm guard, unearthed from a tomb, has a black base color and a pattern of yellow, red, and green curved clouds, mountains, and dogwood stripes that vary and embellish each other. The cloud patterns are complemented by tigers, qilins, and horsemen in the gaps between auspicious beasts and cloud patterns. Another brocade with four characters "Chang Le Ming Guang" express the ultimate wish for individuals, families, and even the country to "enjoy happiness and brightness forever". The back view expresses that true "Changle" and "Mingguang" can only be achieved in a world of divine protection and auspicious gathering.

3. The localization characteristics and connotation evolution of foreign patterns

There are numerous classic patterns in Shu embroidery, and these designs have evolved across

different dynasties. Some of the changes in patterns stem from the experiences and observations of people in their daily lives. Other alterations are influenced by trade, religious dissemination, and migration.

3.1 The Silk Road and the Changes in Shu Embroidery Patterns

Shu brocade is produced in the Shu region, which is Chengdu. "Chengdu is the intersection of the three major transportation corridors and economic belts of the Northern Silk Road, Southern Silk Road, and Yangtze River Economic Belt"^[1]. The trade routes between China and foreign countries have brought new patterns to Shu brocade, such as grape patterns, pomegranate patterns, lion patterns, as well as the most typical linked-beads patterns and animal bird patterns. Grapes are originally from the Mediterranean coast of West Asia, and the patterns wrapped around grape vines symbolize harvest and life. With Alexander's Eastern Expedition, grape patterns were introduced to Central Asia with Greek culture, and then entered China through the Silk Road. In the Tang Dynasty, grape patterns reached their peak of dissemination, moving from decorative objects to textiles, sculpture, architecture, and other fields. "Fortune bird and Grape Pattern Brocade" is a representative of Sichuan brocade in the Tang Dynasty. The brocade has a red background color, and the image is a series of bead rings with a string of grapes hanging above. Pomegranates are originally from Persia, and pomegranate patterns often appear on their reliefs and artifacts. Later, pomegranate was introduced to China, and pomegranate patterns also appeared on textile designs. Later on, pomegranate patterns further integrated with local patterns, becoming more magnificent and complex, such as "pomegranate entwined branches" and "pomegranate flower and bird patterns", becoming a witness to cultural and artistic exchanges between the East and the West.

Lions are not native species in the Central Plains. Lions are native to Africa and West Asia, and in Babylonian and Persian cultures, lions are considered a symbol of royal power. Lion patterns also appeared in various art forms such as textiles and sculpture in China along the Silk Road. The Shu Jin Pu records the pattern of lion groups, which is speculated to be a combination of bead patterns and lion patterns. The lion pattern later combined with China's auspicious culture and lion dancing culture, becoming one of the local patterns. In addition to the lion pattern, the wild boar pattern in Shu brocade also reflects the exchange between China and foreign countries^[2]. This pattern appeared in the middle of the linked-beads pattern, but its popularity in China was relatively short due to conflicts with local cultural meanings. Later, the wild boar pattern gradually disappeared.

In ancient Greek architecture, the prototype of the honeysuckle pattern was the Greek vine leaf pattern, decorated on the Corinthian column capitals in the shape of "coiling grass". During the late Eastern Han Dynasty to the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, honeysuckle decorative patterns were introduced to China. In the Tang Dynasty, it gradually integrated into traditional Chinese culture and aesthetic concepts by combining with the local image of honeysuckle in China. In Shu brocade patterns, honeysuckle patterns are widely used and have become one of the most popular patterns among people.

The linked-beads pattern is a large circular ring formed by connecting many small round beads, with paired animal patterns or scene images inside the ring. This Sichuan brocade pattern was transported from Central Asia through the Western Regions to the interior via the Silk Road. At first, it was in the style of Persian brocade, but later it was redesigned by Tang Dynasty court painter Dou Shilun, incorporating Chinese animal themes and adding plant patterns to the linked-beads pattern^[3], making the entire pattern more magnificent.

3.2 The Spread of Buddhism and Changes in Shu Brocade Patterns

Buddhism came along the Silk Road, from west to east, and influenced the Western Regions, thus influencing the Han region. Shu also absorbed a lot of Buddhist culture, as evidenced by the grottoes in various regions. The patterns of Shu brocade were also influenced by Buddhist images, with lotus patterns, Baoxiang patterns, swastika patterns, as well as flying and Buddha statues representing Buddhist culture appearing in Buddhist patterns.

Lotus patterns were already present on early Chinese handicrafts and textiles, and later with the spread of Buddhism, lotus patterns took on richer meanings. For example, the Baoxiang pattern formed in Shu brocade, and the Baoxiang flower pipa instrument brocade belt stored in the Masakura Temple in Japan, which is this pattern. The center is a flower cluster composed of eight flower heads, and the outer ring is surrounded by a larger eight flower head flower ring pattern, with colors of black, red, and

yellow, very dignified and gorgeous. The lotus pattern and bead pattern on Shu brocade are combined to create a more complex entwined lotus, with plant branches and vines curled and intertwined with floral and leaf patterns, forming Border pattern and Allover pattern.

3.3 Other influences on Shu brocade patterns

In modern times, Western missionaries came to China and brought Western aesthetic themes, such as roses, lilies, and stories and characters related to the Bible. In addition, the Southern Silk Road brought common patterns from Southeast Asia, such as palm leaves, peacocks, elephants, and other common animal and plant patterns. In the ancient book *Shu Jin Pu*, there is a mention of peacock patterned Shu brocade, indicating that this animal pattern already existed at that time. However, there have been some variations of brown leaf patterns, such as variations similar to brown leaf patterns in plant patterns related to the Tang Dynasty's Lingyang Gong style.

4. Changes in the Art Form of Shu Brocade under the Exchange between China and the West

In addition to being influenced by exchanges between China and foreign countries in terms of pattern themes, Shu brocade has also been influenced to some extent in composition, color, and style.

4.1 The influence of composition style on Shu brocade

In terms of composition, the artistic style of Shu brocade in the Han Dynasty was more casual, extending horizontally in an abstract and dynamic way. However, in the Tang Dynasty, the artistic style of Shu brocade was influenced by foreign art forms, developing symmetrical and circular structures. For example, the common composition of the linked-beads pattern in Shu brocade is the linked-beads pattern, which is a large circle pattern composed of many small round beads connected together, embroidered with symmetrical animals inside the circle, such as sheep, peacocks, winged horses, etc. The Lianzhu pattern brings a new and exotic skeleton form to the composition of Shu embroidery. It can be said that the composition of the entire Shu brocade has transitioned from a casual linear aesthetic to a more orderly geometric aesthetic.

In the Song and Yuan dynasties, the art forms of Shu brocade became more complex and diverse. In addition to the simple linked-beads pattern, the developed patterns such as Badayun and Baoxiang patterns were continuously replicated in Allover pattern or Eight-pointed Complicated Lozenge Pattern, like a kaleidoscope, resulting in various intricate and fully structured patterns. Although the Batik craft in Southeast Asia is different from the weaving technique of Shu brocade, its geometric symmetry and layered repetitive pattern style may have indirectly influenced the composition form of Shu brocade through trade exchanges. During this period, both the aesthetic of linear extension and the aesthetic of geometric plane composition existed, but the patterns became more complex and diverse.

After the Ming and Qing dynasties, in addition to the various decorative patterns mentioned above, the influence of Western realistic painting led to the emergence of compositional techniques characterized by narrative elements, a sense of perspective, and a play of light and shadow. Instead of relying solely on abstract patterns, Shu brocade began to depict specific figures, landscapes, and clear narrative themes. Furthermore, under the influence of foreign religions, Shu brocade also started to imitate intricate foreign carpet styles and Western Rococo designs. This illustrates how Shu brocade continuously absorbed and integrated foreign artistic cultures, constantly evolving and developing in its artistic composition.

4.2 Changes in the Colors of Shu Brocade

The artistic style change of Shu brocade is not only reflected in the composition, but also in the use of colors. The colors of Shu brocade in the Han Dynasty often used black, red, dark blue, green, yellow, and white, with black, dark green, and deep blue being the most common. Overall, it gives people a sense of antiquity, intensity, heaviness, and mystery. After the Tang Dynasty, the colors of Shu brocade were mostly royal blue, emerald green, bright yellow, vermilion red, pure white, etc. Overall, the brightness and purity of the colors used were higher, forming a strong contrast between the front and back colors, and the colors were more intense and gorgeous. On this basis, influenced by the preferences of West Asia, the use of gold thread in Shu brocade began to increase, making the colors more colorful and dazzling. The color changes in the later period of Shu brocade may also be

influenced by Southeast Asian aesthetics. Southeast Asia excels in using bright colors such as crimson and indigo. Some of the bright tones in Shu brocade may have been inspired by the Southeast Asian dye trade, such as the ancient Shu brocade's use of "Shu Hong brocade" which may be related to the Southeast Asian habit of using red dyes.

5. Conclusion

Located at the crossroads of the Maritime Silk Road, the Overland Silk Road, and the Yangtze River Economic Belt, Sichuan has long served as a vital hub for cultural and economic exchange. This strategic position introduced new patterns and influences into Shu brocade. Beyond trade, cultural interactions and migration also enriched its aesthetic sensibilities. Foreign motifs such as grapevine patterns and lion designs were gradually localized and imbued with new meanings. Meanwhile, the continuous technical advancements in Shu brocade weaving made it possible to produce increasingly intricate patterns like linked-pearl designs and the eight-way labyrinth motif. Structurally, Shu brocade has evolved from the casual horizontal linear composition of the Han Dynasty to the orderly geometric composition of the Tang Dynasty, and finally to the diverse composition patterns where multiple composition methods coexist. Some composition methods have become increasingly complex. In terms of color, influenced by Western culture, Shu brocade has shifted from heavy and mysterious dark to highly contrasting colors with high brightness, and from ancient and sacred to secular nobility and splendor. In the context of globalization today, the evolution of Shu brocade provides inspiration for design. In the constant changes, textile design not only needs to protect the most core cultural core, but also constantly absorb different elements to radiate new vitality. This study has not yet conducted a deep analysis of cultural changes, and it is hoped that in the future, more specific research will be conducted on the relationship between patterns, composition, color, and culture.

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