

The Artistic Heritage Forms of Khorchin Embroidery

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Abstract: *Under the influence of contemporary global efforts in conserving intangible cultural heritage, the embroidery art of Khorchin has been endowed with renewed significance, content, and forms. This study employs the anthropology of art perspective to situate the art of Khorchin embroidery within a new historical context. Employing ethnographic methods, it interprets cultural meanings through the four forms of artistic heritage—local, ethnic, aesthetic, and artisanal—thus presenting the unique aesthetic experiences of Khorchin embroidery within specific temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts. This study enriches the research of Chinese artistic heritage with a specific case.*

Keywords: *Khorchin embroidery art; Artistic heritage; Anthropology of art*

1. Introduction

According to the Introduction to Graduate Education Disciplines and Majors and Their Basic Degree Requirements in China, Artistic Heritage was established as a new sub-discipline within the field of Arts Studies in 2024. It defines its research focus as the tangible and intangible cultural heritage that falls within the realm of art. The primary areas of exploration include this heritage's historical and cultural significance, methods for its preservation and documentation, principles governing its transmission and dissemination, and mechanisms for its creative transformation and innovative development. Artistic heritage encompasses various traditional art forms, with its theoretical foundation rooted in art studies. However, it also draws upon various interdisciplinary knowledge and methodologies, including history, archaeology, museology, cultural preservation technology, anthropology, and sociology. As such, it is a highly interdisciplinary and complex field of study characterized by its cross-disciplinary nature.

Art Heritage represents a new form that integrates art and heritage, encompassing the traditional roots of artistic evolution and emerging art forms. [1] It emphasizes the duality of aesthetic value and practical function. Research on Art Heritage should not be confined to the philosophical definitions of art's new forms as "epistemology" and "agnotology". Instead, art should be regarded as an integral part of specific ways of life, with its meaning and value deeply rooted in these contexts. Therefore, understanding art requires an analysis of its internal structure and appreciating its role and significance within particular cultural backgrounds. In specific contexts, art embodies unique logic and values inherent to that environment. To resist the disappearance of traditional culture and bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, the heritage movement emphasizes cultural diversity, recognizing heritage as a new mode of cultural production in the present[2]. As a specific type of heritage, artistic heritage naturally possesses distinct characteristics, closely intertwined with particular political and economic conditions.

Art anthropology focuses on the artistic expressions within particular contexts, stressing the importance of situating art within the socio-cultural framework of its origin for comprehensive study. In investigating the forms of Art Heritage, the methodologies of participant observation and field research used in art anthropology are invaluable for understanding the cultural symbolism and functions behind embroidery patterns, colors, and techniques within specific societies.

Khorchin embroidery art, as a traditional craft categorized under intangible cultural heritage, represents a living culture characterized by oral transmission and personal instruction. It embodies the life experiences, historical traditions, collective memories, and social practices of specific communities. Through the lens of artistic anthropology, we can deeply explore the cultural connotations of Khorchin embroidery, revealing its symbolic significance and social functions within Mongolian society. This approach will contribute to the protection and transmission of cultural heritage.

2. The Formation of Khorchin Embroidery Art

The Khorchin tribe emerged during the Mongol-Yuan period, settling in the northeastern grasslands of Inner Mongolia near the Erguna River, Hulun Lake, and the Hailar River. Over time, the Khorchin tribe, rooted in the nomadic culture of the Mongolian steppe, continuously absorbed cultural influences from the Jurchen, Manchu, Central Plains agricultural practices, and Tibetan Buddhism. Serving as a key hub along the Silk Road of the Steppe, Khorchin culture evolved through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, culminating in the unique cultural identity it possesses today.

As a crucial bearer of Khorchin culture, Khorchin embroidery art embodies a rich fusion of steppe nomadic traditions, Central Plains agricultural influences, and broader Eurasian inland cultures. The embroidery's materials, designs, patterns, and techniques reflect this intricate cultural synthesis. Informed by extensive fieldwork, a multi-dimensional analysis of its local, ethnic, aesthetic, and artisanal aspects allows for a deeper understanding and preservation of this heritage. Such an approach underscores the local distinctiveness, ethnic identity, aesthetic significance, and technical sophistication inherent in this art form. This refined version improves academic tone and coherence while maintaining the original content [3].

3. The Development and Inheritance of Khorchin Embroidery Art by Family Women

As a vital part of Khorchin local culture, Khorchin embroidery is deeply intertwined with local knowledge. This knowledge is rooted in the region's specific natural environment, social structures, and cultural traditions, and it has been continuously enriched and deepened through generations. Throughout history, Khorchin embroidery has evolved by integrating the practical needs of life on the grasslands, gradually developing a distinctive style of embroidery techniques and patterns. Local natural resources, a semi-agricultural and semi-nomadic lifestyle, folk customs, and religious beliefs have all directly influenced the selection of embroidery materials and the transmission of techniques. This knowledge is reflected in accumulating craft skills and a deeper understanding and interpretation of local culture and ways of life.

In July 2024, I visited Ms. Asima (1947-), recognized as an "Inner Mongolian Costume Art Inheritor", in the Khorchin District of Tongliao City. Reflecting on her early experiences learning embroidery, she recalled:

"Growing up in the Uligmu village, I was nurtured and educated by Khorchin's traditional culture. Due to the demands of daily life, Khorchin women needed to make clothes, shoes, and hats for their families and relatives. During their spare time, women would gather to sew and mend after herding and farming. While chatting and embroidering with my grandmother, mother, and neighboring aunts, I learned how to draw embroidery patterns, match threads, and master stitching techniques. At the time, everything from tobacco pouches, pillows, and Mongolian robes to boots and shoes was handmade, with embroidery featuring motifs like lotus, mimosa, peach blossom, and pomegranate flowers. Occasionally, we would even receive tasks from the temple, helping to sew prayer flags and embroider auspicious symbols like the endless knot, treasure vase, and dharma wheel in exchange for silk threads and fabric. Therefore, to some extent, the embroidery patterns I have collected represent the original designs of the embroidery culture from the Khorchin Grasslands."

The transmission of this craft primarily occurs within families, particularly among women. This familial mode of transmission ensures the continuity of the technique and strengthens cultural identity and social cohesion. In the Khorchin region, girls typically begin learning embroidery at a young age, gradually mastering this intricate craft under the guidance of their elders. The passing down of embroidery skills is not merely a technical transfer; it also serves as a cultural and moral education process through which Mongolian historical memory and cultural traditions are preserved and perpetuated. The selection and expression of embroidery patterns are closely linked to local cultural traditions, forming a distinct mode of cultural expression. These patterns, crafted by skilled embroiderers, transform local culture into tangible artistic forms, reflecting reverence and gratitude for nature while symbolizing aspirations for a prosperous life, thus conveying the unique spirit of the local culture.

The local embroidery art form demonstrates its practical application and the transmission of skills within a specific region and underscores its unique position and emotional significance within the local culture. This local form is not only a part of the cultural heritage but also a key manifestation of the vitality and creativity of local traditions. By studying the local morphotypes of embroidery art, we can provide critical theoretical support and practical guidance for protecting and inheriting these valuable

cultural heritages. This has profound implications for the comprehensive safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and the processes of cultural reproduction [4].

4. The Influence of Mongolian on Khorchin Embroidery Art

4.1. The Foundation of Khorchin Embroidery Influenced by Ethnic Culture

Establishing the Qing Dynasty laid the foundation for the collaboration and exchange between various ethnic groups, including the Mongols, Han, and Manchu, within the Khorchin tribe. This exchange significantly influenced the development of Khorchin embroidery, which often displays a strikingly diverse range of designs. These patterns, passed down through generations, serve as decorative elements and symbols of ethnic identity and cultural heritage. The embroidery motifs can be broadly categorized into animal and plant designs, geometric patterns, composite motifs, and religious symbols.

Ms. Asima, for instance, spent three years creating the giant pouch Mongolian Charm. The pouch measures 180 cm in length and 55 cm in width, with ribbons extending 96 cm and a thickness of 10 cm. Made from high-quality satin, the piece was meticulously crafted using traditional Mongolian embroidery techniques such as appliqué, coiling embroidery, and engraving embroidery. The motifs include common steppe animals like horses, cattle, sheep, camels and yurts, horse-head fiddles, and saddles.

Additionally, elements such as pine and deer, plum and magpie, peonies, pomegranate flowers, cloud patterns, and auspicious knots are incorporated, symbolizing good fortune, longevity, prosperity of livestock, love, fertility, and well-being. These motifs represent the emotional ties between individuals or communities and their living environments (including their residential regions). Each embroidery pattern tells a story about Mongolian culture, reflecting the people's reverence for nature, respect for their ancestors, and commitment to maintaining social order [5].

4.2. The Integration and Development of Khorchin Embroidery and Mongolian Society

Embroidery in Mongolian society also plays a crucial social role. Beyond personal aesthetic expression, it serves important functions in festivals, religious ceremonies, and social interactions. For example, embroidered works are often used as decorations and gifts in significant events such as weddings and rituals. This shows the artistic value of embroidery and highlights its role in enhancing ethnic unity and sustaining social relationships.

With the modernization of society, Khorchin embroidery art has retained its traditional essence while adapting to new social environments. This adaptation reflects both the innovation in embroidery techniques and the resilience of Mongolian culture in the modern world. Today, embroidery symbolizes culture and has become integral to the cultural and creative industries. Commercialization and market promotion have revitalized traditional culture, breathing new life into this ancient art form.

5. The Aesthetic Forms Presented by Khorchin Embroidery Art

5.1. Khorchin Embroidery Pattern

The embroidery motifs of Khorchin are a visual extension of Khorchin culture, embodying traditional values through the medium of visual arts. Daily, Khorchin embroidery art adheres to the aesthetic principle that "usefulness is beauty." The traditional attire of Khorchin women includes Mongolian robes, vests, boots, embroidered shoes, ear protectors, waistbands, pouches, and sewing kits. Commonly used plant motifs feature twining branches, spirals, peonies, lotuses, water lilies, plum blossoms, pomegranates, chrysanthemums, and cloud patterns. Animal motifs include butterflies, fish, deer, mandarin ducks, oxen, horses, sheep, and camels. Geometric patterns include circular motifs, swastika designs, fret patterns, and script designs.

5.2. Color Application in Khorchin Embroidery

The use of color in Khorchin embroidery also reflects a unique aesthetic sensibility. Mongolian embroidery favors bright, bold colors with strong contrasts like red, blue, black, yellow, and green. These highly saturated colors create a striking visual impact and often carry specific cultural symbolism [6].

5.3. Technical Requirements for Khorchin Embroidery

The intricacy of Khorchin embroidery techniques further emphasizes the importance of its aesthetic form. Passed down through generations, these techniques are highly complex, requiring immense patience and skill from the artisans. Every stitch is carefully planned, and the embroidered patterns demand symmetry, balance, and meticulous attention to detail. This pursuit of technical perfection is not only a guarantee of the high quality of the embroidery but also a reflection of the community's devotion to achieving aesthetic excellence.

6. The Artisanal Connotation of Khorchin Embroidery Art

6.1. The Core Elements of Artisanal Embroidery in Khorchin

Khorchin embroidery art has inherited pattern elements from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, showcasing a high degree of technical complexity in its creation. This craft requires exceptional manual skills, extensive experience, and a deep understanding of patterns and color schemes. The embroidery process involves precise pattern design on fabric, followed by the meticulous use of various colored silk threads. This process demands exceptional patience and expertise, particularly due to the intricate patterns and strict attention to detail. These techniques are the core elements of the "artisanal forms" of Khorchin embroidery.

6.2. The core Artisanal Techniques of Khorchin Embroidery

Khorchin embroidery primarily relies on four core techniques: appliqué embroidery, needle embroidery, coiling embroidery, and engraving embroidery, complemented by velvet clipping and satin fabric collage. Appliqué embroidery involves cutting different colored satin and cotton fabric remnants into the required patterns and sewing them together. This technique is suitable for various satin fabrics, creating lively, full, and three-dimensional floral designs that are durable and often used for decorating women's shoes and household items. Needle embroidery techniques use colored silk threads, gold and silver threads, and various silks to stitch patterns onto garments. The most commonly used stitches include satin, step, and scattered stitches. Coiling embroidery employs a looping stitch technique to create traditional Mongolian patterns, with both hollow and solid coiling stitches, known for their durability and typically used on boots. Engraving embroidery, called cutwork, involves placing patterns on fabric, velvet, or leather, cutting them with scissors to create floral designs, and securing them with coiling or overlock stitches. This method includes same-color, matching-color, and contrasting-color techniques, resulting in a dynamic and three-dimensional effect. Engraving embroidery is often used on hats, shoes, boots, tobacco pouches, waistbands, and wrestling pants."

Khorchin embroidery art has continuously adapted to modern society's needs through preservation and innovation, serving as a vital cultural link between the past and the future. It not only showcases the cultural essence of the Mongolian people but also reflects the intelligence and creativity of the embroidery artisans, making it an integral part of the artistic heritage [7].

7. Conclusion

Khorchin embroidery art, rooted in the cultural heritage of the Khorchin Mongolian people, stands as a testament to the complex interplay between tradition, craftsmanship, and aesthetic expression. Over centuries, this form of art has evolved, absorbing diverse cultural influences from the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. These interactions have enriched its motifs and techniques, positioning it as a symbol of cultural identity and continuity for the Khorchin people.

The concept of Local Forms underscores the intrinsic connection between cultural heritage and its surrounding natural environment, social structures, and cultural traditions. In the context of heritage conservation, it is essential to understand and respect local knowledge. Cultural heritage should not be preserved in isolation but rather safeguarded within its broader cultural context, ensuring its transmission and continuity in harmony with its original environment and meaning. Mongolian Forms highlights the significance of cultural heritage as a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural recognition, emphasizing its critical role in maintaining social relationships and transmitting cultural memory. Aesthetic Forms focuses on the visual and sensory dimensions of heritage, incorporating aesthetic value into the criteria for heritage preservation. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding and presentation

of the multifaceted value of cultural heritage, fostering greater public awareness and encouraging broader participation in its protection.

The study of the artistic heritage forms provides a multi-dimensional analytical perspective for the research and preservation of artistic heritage. It offers a deeper understanding of cultural heritage from different levels, emphasizing its local specificity, ethnic identity, aesthetic value, and the complexity of craftsmanship. This ensures the continuous development of cultural heritage within modern society. Khorchin embroidery art, through a comprehensive analysis of its local, ethnic, aesthetic, and artisanal forms, provides significant theoretical support and practical guidance for the study and preservation of artistic heritage. This multi-dimensional approach enables a deeper understanding and more effective protection of cultural heritage, emphasizing its local specificity, ethnic identity, aesthetic value, and technical complexity by integrating the research outcomes from artistic heritage forms, heritage conservation efforts can be carried out more comprehensively and targeted, thereby contributing to the more effective safeguarding and transmission of human cultural diversity.

In the context of globalization, the knowledge of artistic heritage forms has allowed embroidery art to preserve its distinctiveness and vitality within a landscape of cultural diversity. As China's efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage deepen, Khorchin embroidery has not only continued to thrive locally. Still, it has also expanded to wider regions through cultural exchange and market-oriented promotion. Embroidery artisans actively seek to integrate foreign cultural elements with their traditions, creating a dialogue between them. They aim to develop new cultural and emotional expression modes through this convergence of diverse cultural influences and styles.

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