

# Canton Embroidery and the Maritime Silk Road: The Fusion of Intangible Cultural Heritage Traditions and Modern Values

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## Abstract

Canton Embroidery, one of the Four Famous Embroideries of China, is not only an important cultural symbol along the ancient Maritime Silk Road but also carries rich historical and cultural significance. This paper explores the historical role of Canton Embroidery on the ancient Maritime Silk Road, its inheritance, and its innovation in modern society. It analyzes its contemporary value as an intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in promoting cultural and economic exchanges within the framework of the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. Through the study of its historical development, technical characteristics, current status, and paths for its inheritance and export, this paper examines the productization of ICH represented by Canton Embroidery. It argues that the modern preservation of traditional ICH crafts should be achieved through innovative design, modern marketing methods, and trade as a means to enhance economic value and foster regional economic development.

**Keywords:** Canton Embroidery; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Maritime Silk Road; Modern Inheritance

## 1. Introduction

With its unique artistic style and rich cultural symbols, Canton Embroidery is not only a significant carrier of Lingnan culture but also an outstanding representative of Chinese traditional culture. It has been recognized as one of the first National Intangible Cultural Heritages. Due to the rise of the Canton Trade System during the Qing Dynasty, Canton Embroidery became a leading force in the export of silk embroidery products. It not only successfully introduced traditional Chinese art to Europe but also actively absorbed Western painting techniques, forming a distinctive blend of Chinese and Western art styles. In the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road strategy, Canton Embroidery can continue to promote mutual understanding and respect between different cultures.

## 2. Canton Embroidery as a Cultural Symbol of the Maritime Silk Road

The Ancient Maritime Silk Road refers to the maritime communication route that connected East Asia and Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and the eastern part of the Africa, utilizing traditional navigation technology (Jiang, 2023). This route facilitated not only maritime trade, but also the exchange of cultures, science, technology, religion, and ideas. It significantly enhanced cross-cultural communication between East and West, deepening mutual understanding and appreciation through the exchange of commodities.

Guangzhou, China, as one of the starting ports of the Maritime Silk Road, became a key center for economic and cultural exchange between China and the West at an early stage. As early as the Qin and Han Dynasties, *the Book of Han – Geography* recorded that Guangzhou’s Panyu was the hub of maritime trade at the time: “Near the sea, there were many rhinoceroses, elephants, tortoiseshells, beads and guillotines, silver, copper, fruits, and cloth, which enriched Chinese merchants and trades. Panyu, one of its capitals.” During the Tang Dynasty, Guangzhou maintained its position as a maritime trade center, as recorded in the *New Book of the Tang Dynasty – Jia Tan Zhuan*: “Guangzhou was a center of maritime trade.” In the Song and Yuan Dynasties, as ocean trade flourished, the imperial court established the Shi Bosi (Bureau for Foreign Shipping) in Guangzhou to oversee sea transportation. Merchant ships from Guangzhou continuously exported Chinese commodities to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and even to the wider world.

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, due to alternating policies of “sea bans” and “open sea” policies, Guangzhou gradually became the only foreign trade port. In the 23rd year of the Kangxi period, the Qing government established the Guangdong Customs to manage foreign trade, leading to the formation of Guangzhou’s unique maritime trade system, with its “one port for all traders” policy. This system gave rise to the Thirteen Factories of Canton, which specialized in foreign trade affairs.

Silk fabrics (embroidery), as a daily artwork with Chinese characteristics that integrates aesthetics and utility, have always been an important trade commodity and cultural carrier of the Maritime Silk Road. As early as the Han and Tang dynasties, maritime trade in silk fabrics (embroidery) flourished, with Chinese silk fabrics (embroidery) being exported from Guangzhou to Southeast Asia and spreading along the Straits of Malacca to West Asia and Europe. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the vigorous development of maritime commodity trade, the role of Silk weaving (embroidery) products underwent a remarkable transformation—from being used mainly for personal use or small quantities as tribute, to evolving into bulk commodities for export (Lan, 2018). Due to Guangzhou’s leading position on the Maritime Silk Road and its advantageous

location, the embroidery factories and workshops in Guangzhou flourished, and the traditional Canton Embroidery techniques became increasingly refined and sophisticated.

In the ninth year of Zhengde of the Ming Dynasty (1514), the Portuguese purchased embroidered dragon robes pieces in Guangzhou, which were highly appreciated by their king upon return. In the twenty-eighth year of Wanli's reign (1600), Queen Elizabeth I of England became enamored with the gold and silver thread embroidery exported from Guangdong and personally advocated for the establishment of the British Embroidery Guild. It can be said that the export of Canton Embroidery directly promoted the development of silk embroidery craftsmanship in Europe.

The solid trade relations and trade patterns established by the Thirteen Factories of Canton during the mid-Qing Dynasty further provided a favorable external environment for the development of the silk embroidery trade. According to *Argot's Diary of the Guangzhou Merchant House*, a Spanish manuscript, among the commodities purchased from Guangzhou by European and American merchant ships at that time, raw silk and silk accounted for a considerable volume (Tang & Tian, 2024). However, in the 24th year of Qianlong's reign (1759), the imperial court imposed a "silk ban" on the export of Zhejiang lake silk, citing the reason that "the price of silk was getting higher and higher". As a result, Guangzhou silk and satin became the primary export products of raw silk from Guangdong ports. The silk embroidery industry in Guangzhou, including Canton Embroidery, gradually expanded, making Canton Embroidery a significant export product in the late Qing Dynasty. Not only was overseas demand for silk fabrics substantial, but they were also highly popular in the domestic market.

Canton Embroidery, once a popular export product, rose to the status of imperial tribute. Examples include the collection of Canton Embroidery pieces at the Palace Museum in Beijing, such as *Canton Embroidery of Landscape with Fishing and Reading*, *Canton Embroidery of Singing Birds*, *Canton Embroidery of Cranes and Deer in Spring*, *Canton Embroidery of Red Phoenix in Morning Sun*, *Canton Embroidery of Spring Comes in Full Form* (white satin ground), and *Canton Embroidery of Double Phoenix on Bamboo and Stone*. The demand from both foreign and domestic markets caused the Guangzhou silk weaving industry to thrive, a momentum that continued into the early years following the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Benefiting from Guangzhou's advantageous position as a key node on the Maritime Silk Road, Canton Embroidery—the bright pearl of Chinese embroidery art—demonstrates not only its excellent craftsmanship and rich cultural heritage but also serves as a vivid testament to the exchange and mutual understanding between Chinese and Western cultures. It symbolizes a significant cultural bond that promotes the progress of civilization between East and West.

### 3. Canton Embroidery as the Shared Cultural Memory of China and the West

Canton Embroidery, often referred to as the folk embroidery technique centered in Guangzhou and extending to the Pearl River Delta region including Shunde and Nanhai, is one of China's Four Famous Embroideries, alongside Suzhou, Hunan and Shu embroidery. As a representative of Lingnan culture, Canton Embroidery carries the collective memory of the history, region, and social customs of the Chinese nation. In June 2006, Canton Embroidery was included in the first group of China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage (NICH), underscoring its significance in Chinese culture and its recognition and protection by the state and society. As an Intangible Cultural Heritage, Canton Embroidery is not only a representation of traditional Chinese embroidery techniques but also a carrier of the historical and cultural memories of the Lingnan region. Simultaneously, it bears witness to the shared cultural memories between China and the West along the ancient Maritime Silk Road.

#### 3.1 Shared Cultural Memory of Decorative Arts

Centered in Guangzhou and circulated throughout the Pearl River Delta region, Canton Embroidery features strong regional characteristics. "The colors used in Canton Embroidery have always been vibrant, with contrasting red and green tones, reflecting the folkloric and Lingnan flavors." notes Hu and Lei (2019). This vibrant color scheme is closely related to the southern subtropical monsoon climate of the Lingnan region, known for its abundant light, moist soil, and diverse plants and animals. In addition to the colorful palette, Canton Embroidery frequently features flowers and fruits as motifs, with allegorical patterns symbolizing prosperity. For instance, lychee, a characteristic fruit of Lingnan, has long been a distinctive element in Canton Embroidery, and the peacock, a common bird in the subtropics, is a skillfully depicted and favored motif.

In terms of technique, Canton Embroidery is renowned for its varied stitches, even stitching, and the skillful use of texture to express the materiality of objects. The bright colors, intricate compositions, exquisite craftsmanship, and rich textures make Canton Embroidery one of China's most famous traditional arts, long celebrated for its beauty and cultural significance.

During the Canton Trade System period, the Thirteen Factories of the Qing Dynasty, including the silk embroidery represented by Canton Embroidery, sparked a "China Craze" in Europe, directly influencing Western art aesthetics. Westerners recognized the skill and artistic achievement of Canton Embroidery, commenting, "The Chinese are skilled in embroidery, and the people of Guangdong are particularly good at it. ... Canton Embroidery is mostly imported into Europe" (Sun, 2007). Eighteenth-Century *Chinese Export Works of Art* details the popularity of Canton Embroidery and other silk embroidery in the United

Kingdom. Canton Embroidery's complex double-sided scarves were particularly favored by British noblewomen, some of whom, via East India Company ships, even sent clothing or fabric pieces to China, commissioning Chinese embroiderers to decorate them. From the 17th to the 18th centuries, Canton Embroidery was also favored by European royalty. The British royal family was especially keen to decorate their homes with various "Chinese-style" wall hangings, carpets, and porcelain to create "Chinese rooms". In France, the center of European fashion and culture at the time, the influence of Chinese art was profound. Louis XIV not only adorned the Palace of Versailles with bedspreads and draperies from China but also hosted a ball called the "Emperor of China", where men and women dressed in "Chinese-style" embroidery patterns. Since then, "Chinese-style" embroidery has become a matter of pride in France. The demand for beautiful and exquisite Canton silk embroidery exceeded the supply, greatly stimulating the European imagination about Oriental aesthetics and prompting a transformation in European art.

Notably, Chinese embroidery, especially Canton Embroidery, played a role in the transition of European art and decorative styles from the grand and majestic Baroque style to the soft and delicate Rococo style. The "Chinese style" Rococo style thus became an important element of Western artistic aesthetics.

### 3.2 Shared Cultural Memory of Textile Technologies

The Chinese embroidery represented by Canton Embroidery during the Ming and Qing dynasties set off a trend in the West for Chinese-style textiles, spreading across Europe from the late 16th century to the 18th and 19th centuries. This trend promoted the common progress and development of Chinese and Western textile technologies.

Early Chinese silk exported to Europe was primarily jacquard fabric, but due to the Qing Dynasty's Canton Trade System, jacquard silk produced in Jiangnan was more expensive to transport. Consequently, the production of hand-painted and embroidered silk from Guangzhou for export increased rapidly. In response to market demand, Europe began innovating its textile processes to reduce shipping costs. After the invention of roller printing in Scotland in the 18th century, machines could print various patterns directly, leading to a decline in demand for hand-painted silk. However, embroidered silk, including Canton Embroidery, with its exquisite technique, continued to meet Western aesthetic demands and remained a standout product.

The craze for Chinese-style textiles, represented by Canton Embroidery silk fabrics, also encouraged the Western textile industry to imitate Chinese export textiles. The local silk weaving industry in Europe thrived by adopting oriental motifs or imitating Chinese clothing styles. Queen Elizabeth I, who adored Cantonese gold and silver thread embroidery, founded the British Embroidery Guild in 1600, importing Chinese silk threads for the nobility's clothing. Charles I encouraged silkworm cultivation and the development of the local silk industry. In France, Louis XIV established factories specializing in hand-painted or printed silk fabrics in oriental styles, designing embroidery patterns that combined Chinese and Western elements, which influenced global trends at the time.

The combination of Chinese-style textiles with traditional Western garments and decorations led to innovative developments in both Chinese and Western textile techniques. For instance, European tapestries incorporated many Canton Embroidery patterns. The Canton Embroidery Manila shawl, which fit the daily attire of the Spanish, elevated the shawl to an art form and gradually incorporated into Western fashion.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Western textile industry advanced significantly, driven by a fascination with Chinese-style textiles led by Canton Embroidery silk fabrics. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the Opium War, many Western silk fabrics, enhanced by integrating Oriental techniques, entered the Chinese market, diversifying and enriching Chinese textiles. For instance, European "exotic style silk" inspired by Canton Embroidery patterns and combining traditional Western, Indian and Ottoman Turkish motifs, was sold back to China, where it was admired and imitated as "Western brocades". The Beijing Palace Museum still houses fragments of this "Western brocade" and two imitations. As printing and dyeing technology in Europe advanced, "Chinese style" printed cotton with Oriental patterns, incorporating Rococo elements, gradually influenced the Chinese silk textile composition and design (Tang, 2021).

### 3.3 Shared Cultural Memory of Modern Large-Scale Production and Trade

In Chinese history, silk embroidery was traditionally a status symbol for princes and nobles. However, during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Canton Embroidery became closely linked to large-scale commodity production with strong "commercial attributes". Canton Embroidery product categories were subject to market demands, appealing not only to the court, nobility, and bureaucrats but also to landlords, merchants, and the general public. Its style reflected the "civic literature and art" of the time (Lan, 2018).

For example, the design of Canton Embroidery drawings combined originality and spontaneity. "The design of Canton Embroidery drawings is largely unrestricted: the creation is spontaneous, and the images are generally arranged in a fuller way, emphasizing festivity and liveliness". The vibrant, full compositions catered to the public's aesthetic preference for complexity. Traditional Canton Embroidery also often featured religious or auspicious themes, such as lion dances or patterns

symbolizing blessings and good fortune. Popular designs included “Birds toward the Phoenix,” “Peony and Phoenix,” “Pine and Crane,” “Deer and Crane in Spring” and “Peacock in Flowering Screen,” all of which reflected the folk belief in good luck and happiness (Hu & Lei, 2019).

As demand for Canton Embroidery grew domestically, industry guilds were established. In the 58th year of Qianlong’s reign (1793), Guangzhou founded an embroidery guild—Jinxiu Hang—with a refined division of labor. This allowed for innovation and adaptation to market changes, ensuring Canton Embroidery remained relevant and evolving with the times. The development of Canton Embroidery as a commercial product mirrored the history of modern capitalist mass production in China.

Facing Western markets, Canton Embroidery was the first to become closely associated with modern commerce and trade. To meet overseas demand, Canton Embroidery and other traditional Chinese embroidery styles integrated more Western artistic elements, such as a focus on the background depiction, perspective, and light refraction. This led to the use of brighter colors and a flashier aesthetic. As the Maritime Silk Road expanded during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Canton Embroidery evolved into a unique fusion of Chinese and Western art styles, blending Western painting techniques with traditional Chinese brush painting. Techniques like “using light and shadow to express three-dimensionality and perspective to show depth and distance” became common (Hu & Lei, 2019). This integration not only enhanced Canton Embroidery’s expressive power but also made it more appealing to Western tastes.

Through the establishment of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), UNESCO has emphasized the key role of intangible heritage in promoting cultural diversity, enhancing social cohesion, and maintaining of sustainable social development. In contemporary society, Canton Embroidery serves as both a bridge between the past and future and as an important medium for global cultural exchange and mutual understanding. As a unique cultural resource and handicraft with deep roots in both traditional Chinese culture and local characteristics, Canton Embroidery should be integrated into the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road development strategy. Its participation will not only promote economic growth and regional integration along the maritime trade routes, but also facilitate cultural exchange and mutual learning between different civilizations.

#### **4. The Heritage and Export Path of Canton Embroidery in the Context of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road**

Canton Embroidery has a rich history along the ancient Maritime Silk Road. In the history of cultural exchanges between China and the West, Canton Embroidery has served as an indispensable “ambassador” for fostering cross-cultural communication. In the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, this intangible cultural heritage (ICH), represented by Canton Embroidery can play a vital role by promoting multi-level and multi-channel interactions between China and the countries along the route, helping to establish a harmonious and win-win international relations, that foster mutual respect and shared prosperity among different cultures.

In terms of foreign exchanges, it is crucial to fully utilize the common cultural symbols of China and the West, such as those carried by Canton Embroidery on the ancient Silk Road, to establish cross-cultural platforms that strengthen humanistic ties between countries along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. This would promote the interaction of Chinese and Western cultures for mutual prosperity. For example, the creation of ICH cultural innovation zones based on the shared cultural memory of the ancient Maritime Silk Road has been proposed. These zones could establish cultural cooperation organizations, hold regular cultural exchanges and conferences, and vigorously develop the cultural industry system (Ma & Xu, 2019).

The inheritance and development of the traditional art are indispensable in promoting ICH, like Canton Embroidery, in the context of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Although Canton Embroidery was once known as “China’s gift to the West” for its unique aesthetics and decorations, contemporary technology has posed significant challenges to its traditional production process. The complex techniques of Canton Embroidery face the risk of being lost due to a lack of inheritors—an issue common to many ICH traditions.

Firstly, modern lifestyles have made the inheritance and preservation of ICH programs more challenging. For instance, many young people are more inclined to pursue modern lifestyles and entertainment, showing less interest in traditional folk arts and skills.

Secondly, as noted in the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), safeguarding ICH relies on strengthening its links with communities, groups and individuals (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2). In the context of globalization, it is complex to protect ICH characterized by local features, while preserving cultural diversity. Alongside developing appropriate policies and legislation to protect these heritages, innovative methods and technologies should be employed to document and disseminate these intangible cultural assets. Moreover, there should be a deeper understanding of global standards to enhance the safeguarding and transmission of this valuable heritage (Stefano et al., 2012).

The current Canton Embroidery cultural and creative products largely follow traditional design ideas, lacking the innovation and modern elements required to attract contemporary consumers, particularly younger generations. “Existing Canton

Embroidery cultural creations mainly follow traditional thinking patterns, making it difficult to capture consumers' attention" (Yi, 2024).

However, with globalization, opportunities still exist to continue passing down the ICH represented by Canton Embroidery. With the improvement of living standards and the growth of cultural consumption, demand for traditional culture is increasing. By developing distinctive ICH products and services, this demand can be met, further promoting the inheritance of ICH and contributing to the economy. For instance, the cultural platform of the Maritime Silk Road could offer both online and offline experiences of Canton Embroidery and other ICH, creating unique multi-sensory immersive experiences that attract younger generations to the charm of Canton Embroidery. Additionally, Guangdong's rich cultural heritage of the Maritime Silk Road could be leveraged to foster collaboration between universities in Guangdong and those in other countries along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, facilitating research in the humanities and social sciences while cultivating a pool of ICH talents (Jiang, 2024).

Canton Embroidery, as a representative of ICH in the marketplace, should focus on innovative design and the reconstruction of modern life. By integrating modern design and technological advancements, Canton Embroidery can develop cultural and innovative products with both contemporary appeal and market competitiveness. This integration can inject new vitality into Canton Embroidery, while also providing fresh inspiration for modern design and other fields. For instance, cross-border techniques could merge Canton Embroidery with modern decorative painting art, preserving the bright colors and traditional patterns while contrasting them with the simpler colors and styles of modern decorative art (Chen, 2024). The high efficiency and accuracy of digital technology could also be harnessed to innovatively reconstruct Canton Embroidery's traditional patterns and colors, blending cultural symbols of ICH with modern aesthetics to achieve a "living inheritance" in daily necessities.

In terms of marketing, a strategy combining ICH with e-commerce, online and offline, could be adopted to promote Canton Embroidery through short videos, live broadcasts, and social platforms. This approach would help increase consumers' understanding and appreciation of ICH. E-commerce platforms could also facilitate the sale of ICH products, integrating marketing efforts to boost both heritage preservation and market growth (Wu & Hu, 2024).

## 5. Conclusion

Canton Embroidery, a treasure of Lingnan culture, not only integrates the artistic aesthetics of China and the West but also plays an essential role in fostering mutual understanding between civilizations and contributing to shared cultural memory. Its historical legacy offers valuable insights and inspiration for the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

Canton Embroidery's influence in overseas markets, particularly its historical popularity in Western societies and its reciprocal impact on China after being embraced by the West, has facilitated both the circulation of goods and the deepening of cultural understanding. Through Canton Embroidery, China's traditional craftsmanship has been merged with Western aesthetic principles to create a unique artistic style. The spread of this style has helped build harmonious and mutually beneficial international relations, enhancing mutual respect and appreciation among different civilizations.

In contemporary times, Canton Embroidery should continue to serve as a cultural bridge, providing new opportunities for Guangdong—and China's ICH more broadly—to go global. By deepening cultural exchanges among countries along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Canton Embroidery can strengthen both national unity and cultural confidence while fostering shared cultural memory and cultural community between China and the West. Through Canton Embroidery, the power of traditional ICH transcends time and space, connecting past and the future, East and West.

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