

Integrating Traditional Chinese Needlework Imagery and Techniques into Contemporary Textile Art Practice

by
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Wensi Li

Abstract

Integrating Traditional Chinese Needlework Imagery and Techniques into
Contemporary Textile Art Practice

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My thesis project represents my personal critical exploration, as a Chinese woman, in search of my cultural identity through my contemporary textile art practice. My thesis work attempts to integrate imagery and techniques from traditional Chinese needlework into my art practice in Toronto through deconstruction and reconstruction to create textile artwork that reflects my cultural identity and brings about a fusion of the East and the West. At the same time, I feel troubled by the absence of traditional Chinese artistic expressions in garments mass-produced in China due to alienation of workers in the industrialized production process. Using sewing, patchwork and embroidery techniques with pieces from discarded mass-produced garments and my textile artwork, I created new garments. I intend them to be my critical response to the situation of worker alienation, hoping to prompt the audience to reconsider their conceptualization of 'Made in China'.

Keywords: Traditional needlework techniques, Chinese motifs, contemporary textile art, women garment workers, mass production.

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Dedication

To Yu Lin

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Introduction

My thesis project represents my personal critical exploration, as a Chinese woman, in search of my cultural identity through contemporary textile art practice. I attempted to explore and express my cultural heritage in my artwork through reframing and integrating imagery from traditional Chinese handcrafted needlework to create new fabric designs; and by using traditional needlework techniques of sewing, patchwork and embroidery to make new garments by combining old mass-produced garments from China with my newly created fabrics.

Traditional needlework objects created by my grandmothers, great grandmother and grandmother-in-law for my use (Figure 1) have always impressed and influenced me.



Figure 1: Traditional Needlework Objects Created by Elder Women in my Family.

The self-expression of these elder women in my household and their bonding with others through their needlework motivated my thesis research and led me to experiment using imagery and techniques from traditional Chinese needlework in my artwork to infuse female cultural and personal identity into my independent textile art practice.

Further impetus for undertaking this research came from a work trip that I undertook in 2012 to the Guizhou province in the subtropical zone of South-west China. The purpose of that business trip was to plan a theatrical event for the province representing the needlework practices of Miao minority¹ women. I was profoundly touched by their appreciation of their zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and geometric cultural symbols, particularly as they were depicted in textiles and women's needlework. This recent personal experience and viewing of distinguished textiles and garments of the Miao minority, reinforced by my reading of Professor Hu Ping's study on Chinese needlework titled *Veiled Beauty—The Culture of Chinese Needlework*, led me to believe that

¹ The Miao is an ethnic group living primarily in southern China's mountains, which is recognized by the government of China as [one of the 56 official minority groups](#) (China Census, 2010).

textiles and women's needlework, among other things, represent the cultural richness of my country, China.



Figure 2: Li and Miao Minority Women weaving and singing (Source: *Chinese Costumes*, 2015).

The documentary, *Chinese Costumes*, released in 2015, portrays women of the Li and Miao Minority in Hainan Province maintaining their needlework practice as a sacred ceremony. They dress up specially and sing specific songs while engaging in needlework (Figure 2) (Yue Zhong, Film). This spirit of joyous and proud cultural self-expression through their process of art creation inspired me to hold a similar attitude while attempting to integrate my culture into my contemporary textile art practice.

I attempted to employ imagery and techniques from my culture into my textile art practice to add authenticity and individual expression to my creations. Through exploration, redesign and development, I produced textile artwork that reflected my exposure to both Eastern and Western cultures that are part of who I am as an artist. Attempting a fusion of the East and the West is not a new phenomenon; some of the most creative minds in the world of Western fashion design have been inspired by Chinese imagery and aesthetics, including Christian Dior, Jean Paul Gaultier, Karl Lagerfeld, Alexander McQueen and Yves Saint Laurent (Hearn 12). Japanese artists such as Miya Ando (Okazaki 113) and Itchiku Kubota (Okazaki 107) successfully reframe their traditional kimono in their contemporary textile practice. Nonetheless, my project was an experiential journey of extending my traditional Eastern self into my contemporary art practice in the West.

For my thesis project, I chose four motifs from traditional Chinese needlework culture, deconstructed them into elements and reconstructed the elements into my own patterns on silk. Using these patterns, I created fabrics that took the form of art installations

representing a fusion of traditional and contemporary, East and West, on the lines of several other artists before me.

The inherent and evident connection between needlework objects and those who produced them also fascinated me. Therefore, when I bought clothes mass-produced in my home country, which exhibit no trace of the culture or identity of the workers—often women of my own age—I worried about the loss of traditional Chinese artful expressions in these ‘Made in China’ garments due to alienation of workers in the mass-production process (elaborated upon in Section 1). In his book, *The Chinese Fashion Industry: an ethnographic approach*, Jinhua Zhao expresses concerns about the lack of cultural identity in the fabric and garments exported around the world from China. He writes that “... the work of Chinese producers is potently reduced to a tag marked ‘Made in China’ that is hidden from view, only to serve as an instrument by which the state regulates the transnational flow of the garments” (Zhao 176). The culture of mass-manufacture and standardization in the Chinese garment industry and the working conditions of garment workers do not appear conducive to individual expression, as can be seen from Figure 3.



Figure 3: Garment Workers in a Factory in China

(Source: <http://money.cnn.com/2014/10/30/news/economy/ozy-china-manufacturing/>)

As a critical response to this issue of alienation of women garment workers in China from what they produce, I created garments by combining pieces of fabric of old, worn mass-produced gowns from China and the new fabrics I created, by employing techniques like sewing, patchwork and embroidery from traditional Chinese needlework practice. Through such deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional needlework imagery and techniques and second-hand mass-produced Chinese made clothes into my contemporary art practice, I attempted to prompt Western audiences to reconsider their conceptualization of ‘Made in China’.

The above artistic response to a social issue was inspired by the work of contemporary Chinese textile artist Yin Xiuzhen (Pace, n.d.), described in Section 2. Theory and research underlying my thesis work, as well as the process and outcome of the work, are recorded in the following sections of this paper.

In Section 1, I provide contextual background for Chinese needlework culture that forms the core of my thesis research, as well as the individual cultural expression(s) that this practice nurtures. I also discuss possible social, political and economic reasons for which the industrialized mass garment production culture might not leave much room for the workers to imprint their individual cultural identity on their products.

In Section 2, I attempt to tease out concepts relevant to the thesis work, through an examination of the ideas of craft, art, needlework, their inter se relationships, contemporary Western textile design techniques, and contemporary needlework practice in China.

I begin Section 3 with a description of the practice-based research methods I used in producing the artwork that my thesis is based upon, starting with individual motifs and culminating in fabric and garment art.

The final section of this paper summarizes my thesis work and its implications for my textile art practice.

By studying the culture of Chinese needlework and researching contemporary trends flowing from the Arts and Crafts movements, my thesis project developed my studio practice to infuse female cultural and personal identity into the textiles and garments that I produce. My work thus focuses on the revival, through a contemporary lens, of Chinese needlework's core characteristics and gracefulness and emphasizes the value of traditional needlework culture in current textile art practice. The garment installation I created is intended to transcend practical function in order to provoke and compel the audience to critically consider underlying meanings. My work, thus, represents "Studio craft" or "Fine Craft," as Risatti positions contemporary craft that has become a part of the intellectual realm in a way that fine art had been, with the educational expansion of the post-World War II period (282).

Section 1: Background

This section sets the backdrop for the thesis project, elaborating on the culture of needlework in China, situating it as a traditional form of self-expression by Chinese women, and outlining contemporary industrial garment manufacturing processes, which do not afford such identification of the women workers with the garments they produce.

Chinese Needlework Culture

There is a difference in the notion of ‘needlework’ between the West and the East. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines needlework as “work done with a needle; especially: work (as embroidery) other than plain sewing” (Full Definition of Needlework). On the other hand, in his study of Chinese needlework, Professor Hu Ping explains that, technically, needlework (女红 Nv Gong) refers to a variety of manual labour and its products, such as dyeing, spinning, sewing, embroidery, weaving, and knitting, which covers nearly all the aspects of everyday life (Hu 126). In my work, I adopt the latter, expanded definition of needlework.

As early as during the late Paleolithic period, knots were developed in China to record things (Huang 96). Chinese knots have a three-dimensional and symmetrical structure, and are not only practical but also decorative (Wakamatsu 371). Over time, the practice evolved to become a cultural symbol of China, endowed with affective and spiritual significance.

Professor Hu Ping, in his study of Chinese needlework culture, indicates the prevalence of social division of labour of men engaging in farm work and women in spinning and weaving in the Peiligang² culture about 8000 years ago (34). Developing out of this historic division of labour between men and women in China, Chinese women mostly participated in elaborate domestic work that included tasks like needlework, while men were more likely to engage in strenuous physical labour.

Needlework practiced by Chinese women has an intricate relationship with their everyday life, material world and social practices,

² The Peiligang culture is the name given by archaeologists to a group of Neolithic communities in the Yi-Luo river basin in Henan Province, China. The culture existed from 7000 to 5000 BC (Liu, n.p.).

which shape their relation to the world. In China, women engage in needlework not just for themselves but for other members of the family and society as well. Needlework, thus, allows them an avenue for cultural and personal expression, helping shape their personality and identity.

Maureen Daly Goggin, in *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles 1750-1950*, explores needlework as a part of a woman's identity. She states that "needlework, whether decorative embroidery, plain sewing, or machine stitching, is both constructed by and constructs gendered identity" (5). While her investigation concentrates on the interpretation of North American needlework practices, several techniques, functions and cultural signifiers are comparable with Chinese needlework as detailed below.

In a traditional Chinese family, needlework generally marks a woman's identity, status and relations with others in their family. As a daughter she is expected to learn the skill of needlework. As a wife, she demonstrates her housekeeping competence through her needlework, and, as a mother, she has the responsibility to guide her own daughter and daughter-in-law in the practice of needlework. Hu Ping's

investigation of Chinese needlework reports that when a woman enters her husband's household after marriage, she is expected to bring not only plenty of woven textiles, sewn clothes and embroidered objects, but also the tools for making them (32). She establishes her relationship with the members in her new family by producing needlework objects for them.

Beyond satisfying the needs of the family, needlework evolved into an object of exchange at a social level (Hu 26). In Ming (1368-1644 A.D.) and Qing (1636-1912 A.D.) dynasties, the feudal palace and government reinforced needlework's value through expropriation and employment of skilful craftswomen; the civil society intensified its value through flexible market exchange. In his research, Hu states that in order to obtain needlework from the public, the authorities published relative norms and systems to guarantee uniform means of exchange (26). From a technique and the product of the technique to a sign of social construction, needlework has had a deep impact on social ethics, aesthetics, and commercial value. All in all, needlework plays a significant role throughout the life of Chinese women.

Thus, Chinese needlework, which includes a variety of textile art practices, can be seen as a traditional vehicle of positive feminine cultural self-expression that helped Chinese women relate to their families and the communities they lived in. As a Chinese woman, I try to revive this sense of cultural self-expression through my textile art practice.

In the contemporary world, handmade garments have largely been replaced by mechanized and digitalized production. Garment producers in China are deprived of self-expression in their products, due to mass production and standardization resulting from industrialization, where individual workers can hold no personal relationship with the objects they produced (Mazanti 74). Mass production alienates garment producers from their traditional ability to infuse affection and cultural meaning into the clothing they produce. The following subsection discusses this point from historical social, economic and political perspectives.

Mass Production and Loss of Worker Identity

Jia Zhangke's documentary film 'Useless' (2007) on China's fashion and clothing industry begins with a ninety second montage of a

congested garment factory in Guangdong³ showing young Chinese women engaged in repetitive tasks with expressionless faces. This is followed by shots of some animated and excited women buying these garments in luxury stores, highlighting the stark contrast between producer and consumer in today's mass-production economy. The documentary illustrates how mindless repetition leads to a loss of the 'self' in the work produced. As an artist, I believe that the self is central to expression and output.

In the documentary, Chinese artist Ma Ke talks about the ways in which handmade clothing both carries and expresses the maker's identity, and how this individual expression is entirely absent in clothing produced in contemporary factory settings where the emphasis is on standardization. The importance of this loss is also underlined by Louise Mazanti (2011) in her essay *Super-Object: Craft as Aesthetic Position*, where she describes how the "handmade" and the "human imprint" of craft are

³ Guangdong province in China had the largest turnover in garment production in 2014, producing 14.4 million pieces from January to June (China Daily).

central characteristics in a “search for authenticity that meets the needs of the alienated consumer in our industrial age” (60).

Earlier, in the 19th century, Karl Marx expressed a similar interpretation of capitalist economic structures in his *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, where he made his analysis, using case studies based on the British Industrial Revolution and successfully demonstrated the negative impact of industrial processes on British textile and garment manufacturing. By extension, the same could hold true for Chinese garment manufacturing.

In addition, there may be economic reasons for the alienation of garment workers from the process of garment mass-production. For example, Naomi Klein, in her *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (2000), examined issues of squeezing wages in China. Along with Klein, many labour groups argue that

... a living wage for an assembly-line worker in China would be approximately US 87 cents an hour... Yet even with these massive savings in labour costs, those who manufacture for the most

prominent and richest brands in the world are still refusing to pay workers in China the 87 cents that would cover their cost of living, stave off illness and even allow them to send a little money to their family (212).

There may be political reasons as well. After the establishment of People's Republic of China in the 1950s, and until the 1980s, Chinese people received education on collectivism that repressed individual growth and personality (Lindsay 623). Individual agency and creativity were stifled by collectivism, which led to Chinese workers developing greater responsiveness to group goals and maintaining high social interest, which is characterised by a focus on social integration and interpersonal responsiveness (Gabrenya, Latane, and Wang 368-384).

Regardless of the reason(s), however, it is common knowledge that mass-produced garments from China do not reflect the kind of individual identity and self-expression that traditional crafts had afforded. In other words, in today's Chinese textile and fashion industry, there is scant evidence of individual workers' values or cultural

background in the work that is produced. There is not enough space for the workers to leave their identity in these fabrics and garments.

There is an example, however, of workers subversively stitching messages into textiles being produced in factories. The Nike Blanket Petition, a 15-foot wide handmade blanket of the Nike swoosh, was created between 2003 and 2008 by a group of international knit and crochet hobbyists (Figure 4) as a microRevolt project (“Blanket” n.p.). A Nike logo was created using 4 x 4 inches stitched squares made by women that represented their signatures to the petition. This blanket acted as a signature for fair labour policies for Nike garment workers. This project acted as an innovative and subversive exploration of imprinting individual’s expression and voice around the issues of contemporary garment industry through women’s handcrafted work.



Figure 4: The NIKE BLANKET petition (Source: <http://microrevolt.org/web/blanket.htm>)

There is evidence of alienation of women factory workers in China in Leslie T Chang's *Factory girls: From the village to city in a changing China*, where Chang documents the life experiences of several factory girls, who are from rural China and work in Dongguan, a city in Southern China, famous for its exported goods:

Back in their hometowns, they could not find jobs, but they wanted to make a living by themselves. By force (there are no jobs) or by will (they want to see the outside world), they chose to go out to cities far, far away from rural villages. Coming to a strange place, they live in smelly dormitories packed with 10 or even more coworkers. Their food is mostly free, but poorly served, which is seldom enough to support eight hours on the assembly line. During the rush season, they often work 13 hours a day to fill the last-minute order. The wages are not good, but better than income made in their hometowns, which encourages even

more girls back home to become factory girls as well (Chen 508-09).”

Admittedly, the issues around alienation of workers in the industrialized production process impact both male and female workers. However, in my Thesis research, I only focus on Chinese women workers. This is because, my study draws heavily from Chinese needlework as practiced by women, and therefore, I would like to look at Chinese women workers in contemporary garment industry as their counterpart.

In my personal experience, as a Chinese woman, the instinctive impulse of practicing needlework still remains an important way for me to express myself as a woman, and I suspect it might be so for other Chinese women, and Chinese garment women workers in particular. As a practising artist residing in the West, I attempted, in my thesis research, to integrate imagery and techniques from Chinese needlework into my art practice to produce artwork that is a fusion of East and West. Further, I created a garment art installation as an attempt to critically respond to social questions around the popular perception of mass-

produced 'Made in China' garments, particularly in the west. Some theoretical concepts relevant to my thesis work are discussed in the next section.

Section 2: Theoretical Framework

This section presents concepts that underpin my thesis work, which attempted to integrate imagery and techniques from traditional Chinese needlework into my contemporary textile studio practice as a fusion between Eastern and the Western textile art practices. Beginning with an examination of the concepts of art and craft from my experience and then from literature, the discussion proceeds to the art and craft movements in the East and the West to examine the notions of art and craft in an industrialized world and the concept of Fine Craft in the contemporary world, as introduced by Risatti (286). The traditional practice of needlework is then examined from the perspectives of art, craft and independent textile practice. This is followed by an illustration from contemporary needlework practices in China about extracting ordinary objects of material culture within a particular society to raise social issues, which served as an inspiration for the final part of my thesis work. Concepts that constitute the theoretical framework guiding my thesis work are listed at the end of the section.

Art and Craft

In my understanding, the perception of an aesthetic work as art or craft varies across contexts, and there could be no fixed boundary between what is art and what is craft. Objects previously recognized as craft could be acknowledged as art in a different time and context, with different interpretations of the object. A well-known, self-trained Chinese artist, Guo Fengyi (1942-2010) with limited formal art education, created large-scale drawings combining traditions of wisdom and myth to articulate ideas of spiritual and metaphysical significance (“Guo Fengyi” n.p.). Her work was not considered art until she came into contact with contemporary curators through the Long March project in 2002. Since then, her work has been exhibited as art internationally in Pittsburgh, Munich, Tokyo, Graz, Sydney, Lausanne and Vancouver. Likewise, cushions made by my grandmother-in-law are considered craft when they are used as functional household objects. But, I believe they could qualify as contemporary art as well, if some experienced curator discovers the artistic/aesthetic potential in them and they are exhibited at an acclaimed gallery, say, in Queen Street West, Toronto.

In the realm of practice, art and craft could be open to diverse interpretations. Collingwood (1938), in his book *The Principles of Art*, claims that art objects are produced in order for the artist to engage his or her own imaginative powers and to invite those of the viewer without having a specific purpose or object in mind (287). Art could be considered as an effort to primarily concentrate on the expression of ideas or concepts, with the artistic expression being facilitated by forms, techniques and materials. Art affords artists a way to narrate their autonomous and critical attitude towards the world. The purpose of making art is to evoke exchange or reflection of ideas, emotions and resonance with the audience. Art is inspiring, provocative, and questioning; as a mental activity it arouses people's mental reflection. Trying to distinguish art from craft, Collingwood states that, whereas the artist begins with an idea or emotion rather than a specific object, the craftsman creates an object according to a pattern or predetermined shape and purpose (285).

Howard Risatti discusses the contemporary Studio Craft movement in "Chapter 27: Development of The Critical Objects of

Studio Craft” of his book, *A Theory of Craft*. Studio craft helps viewers in understanding metaphorically and abstractly what had been taken literally before, for example, function (Risatti 284). Risatti also suggests such craft be thought of as “critical objects of crafts—objects whose aesthetic/artistic potential is concentrated in their exemplary but unfulfillable function” (285). Thus, changes in the way function is understood in contemporary Studio Craft serve to blur the line between craft and fine art, giving rise to fine craft (Risatti 289).

Risatti further supports fine craft, stating that “Fine craft objects coming out of the contemporary Studio Craft movement, whether functional or not, have expanded the expressive possibilities open to the craft field. But more than this is needed for fine craft to be appreciated as art” (Postscript).

In her book *Craft Objects: Aesthetic Context: Kant, Heidegger and Adorno on Craft*, Sandra Corse indicates Studio craft objects (what Howard Risatti, in parallel with the term fine art, calls fine craft) go “a step further and envision themselves as part of the history and tradition of art or craft-as-art”. Here, she refers to craft objects displayed in

galleries and museums and valued by critics and collectors (17). Placing the concept of fine craft in the history and traditions of aesthetic forms and materials, Sandra states that studio crafts or fine craft are “those which are intentionally created by artisans and artists to fulfill a dual purpose: to bring forth these historical forms, materials and methods, and at the same time to provide an aesthetic experience” (17).

Craft is a practice involving visual imagination and manipulation of specific materials. In her book chapter *Defining Ground: Issues for Craft*, Sandra Corse places craft in an aesthetic context (15). Corse posits that craft has direct relation with social production; and the development of craft represents the improvement of social production, the progress of science and technology and human material life. Traditional craft integrates function and aesthetics by unifying the practical purpose and decoration interest. Craft focuses on forms and sophisticated manufacturing processes involving some degree of standard repeat production. However, the standardization is far different from that required by mass manufacture and the objects often have an aura of the art studio rather than the factory.

The Arts and Crafts Movement

The Arts and Crafts Movement (ACM) was an international design movement, which originated in England and flourished between 1880 and 1920, peaking during the two decades from about 1890 to about 1910 (Kaplan 41). A group of British artists and social reformers, inspired by William Morris and John Ruskin, attempted to redefine the role of art and craftsmanship, restore dignity to labour, elevate and ennoble the artisan, create opportunities for women and implement social reform (Pevsner 32). William Morris, one of the major influences on the ACM, and his followers, advocated that artists should turn into craftsmen-designers as had existed in the Middle Ages (Pevsner 42). Medieval art creation, predating the Industrial Revolution, was the production process favoured by the ACM. In the Middle Ages, the artist was a craftsman, proud of executing any commission to the best of his ability (Pevsner 15).

Adherents of the ACM advocated the revival of artistic craftsmanship, not of industrial art, where the true root and basis of all Art lay in handicrafts (Pevsner 17). At the same time, ACM re-integrated art into quotidian activities by “adding beauty and pleasure to the objects

of everyday life”, as well as the very processes by which they were produced—a corrective to the Industrial Revolution’s alienation of the worker that William Morris had learned from the writings of Karl Marx (Mazanti 74). The ACM drew inspiration from craftsmanship for remaining faithful to the materials and working for an objective. Ultimately, both the European and American ACMs planned to reform society through integration of arts and crafts, establishing the experimental mode that holds crafts as the dominant mode of production. In contrast with the dehumanizing industrialization production process, the ACM likened the craftsman to the artist, seeing value in the exquisite workmanship of handmade objects.

Inspired by Western ACM, the Mingei (Folk Crafts) movement from 1926 to 1945 in Japan, led by the philosopher and critic Yanagi Sōetsu, was an Eastern equivalent of this movement (Mingei, n.p.). One of the most significant achievements of the Mingei movement was the establishment of a revolutionary new style of middle-class living. This “combined old and new, East and West, rural and urban in a compelling hybrid that sought to meet the new economic and social conditions of

early 20th-century Japan” (Nakanishi 1). Similar to Western Arts and Crafts Movements, the Mingei movement elevated craftsmen to the position of artists, and advocated that artists should learn from the attitude of craftsmen, which produced a new term “artist-craftsmen” (Mingei, n.p.). It championed the work of noted artist-craftsmen who, by example, “helped to preserve and raise the standards of traditional artisanal craft production threatened by industrialization”⁴.

The Pace Gallery⁵, in 2013—14, exhibited a group show of the historical works by Japanese artists belonging to the original Mingei movement alongside work by modern and contemporary artists, designers and architects. The exhibition, shown in both their New York and London galleries, explored the legacy of Mingei and questioned the presence of craftsmanship in contemporary art. These exhibitions offered a good example of integrating traditional techniques and methods of craftsmanship into the contemporary art world.

⁴ <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/a/arts-and-crafts-japan-1926-1945/>.

⁵ Pace Gallery is a leading contemporary art gallery representing more than 70 artists and estates, with galleries in New York, London, and Beijing. www.pacegallery.com.

In summary, while engineering and manufacturing technology that facilitated the industrial revolution and enabled mass production conflicted with arts and crafts based on individual labour, the ACM, both in the West and the East, encouraged the integration of art and craft and advocated that artists should be inspired by craftsmanship.

Needlework as a Form of Textile Art Practice

Discussions relating to the Arts and Crafts Movement (ACM) show that interpretations of craft and art vary across geographical regions and time. Needlework has a long history in both Eastern and Western cultures as belonging to a type of craftsmanship. The act of needlework requires mobilization of the entire body. It demands extreme patience and circumspection during the production process, worthy of a craftsman. For instance, making a pair of traditional shoe soles requires the meticulous artistic design of motifs per a particular theme but on a restricted scale according to the foot sizes of different people who would be wearing them. It also entails countless, repeated movements of pasting, tapping and sewing hundreds of stitches. Chinese needlework involves choreography of the minds and body movements of the makers. At the same time, the products of needlework have an

aura of artistic aesthetics around them. Therefore, based on the discussion of art and craft, I would consider needlework as an independent textile art practice that combines the aesthetics of design with the manual act of physical creation.

Contemporary Studio Needlework in China

My examination of contemporary studio art practices in China shows needlework to be an important component of some textile art practices. At the same time, these practices exhibit artistic expressions stretching beyond the traditional techniques, functions and materials of needlework practice. Some contemporary Chinese artists have created aesthetic expressions of contemplative and critical themes through the medium of needlework in contemporary galleries and exhibitions in China. The work of Yin Xiuzhen, a contemporary Chinese female artist gaining a reputation for success in the global art world (Pace, n.p.), is discussed below to illustrate such practice. My thesis project drew inspiration from her work.

Yin Xiuzhen has constructed a series of experimental fabric sculptures by sewing textile material such as second-hand clothes, and

mass-produced garments. In her early project, Dress Box (1995) (Figure 5), she explored the subtle relations between individuals and the clothes they wore for a long time.



Figure 5: Dress Box 1995 - Used Clothes, Cement, Homemade Dress Box.

(Source: <http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/12132>)

In this artwork, Yin folded and sewed her clothes together into a homemade suitcase that was made by her father. In the process of using a needle to sew up the edges of the clothing, she said, “the memories seeped out like water through the holes made by the needle” (Yin 22).

She then poured cement mortar into this suitcase to seal up the clothes, together with the innumerable emotions she had experienced when she wore them. She inscribed these words on a bronze plaque attached inside the suitcase's lid: "These clothes are those I've ever worn in the past three decades, which carry my experiences, your memory and traces of time" (60). Her performance of pouring the cement mortar into the suitcase served to freeze her memories regarding the clothing.

Yin believes that clothes are animate. She explains, "clothing is a building material of life that has witnessed my individual growth" (16). Clothes narrated in silence about the taste and identity of the one who wore it. After leaving one's body, they still carry the body temperature and the experiences of that person. The clothes Yin sealed up in her suitcase had been worn for three decades; they were full of her experiences and imprints of that period of time.

In her short, unpublished essay 'About Clothes', mentioned in the monograph *Yin Xiuqin*, she articulated the reason for using old clothes as materials: "I've always been interested in people's life experiences... I feel that clothes are like a second skin; they have their own expressing

language, and are connected with their times, and, therefore, with history” (60). Yin’s art practice, consisting of the preservation of a piece of history, experience, and human-object relationship in plain everyday household objects, is simple but thought provoking.

Yin’s artwork exhibits the sensibility of extracting ordinary objects of material culture within a particular society and raising social issues through needlework. Likewise, my studio practice produced artwork out of garments. I attempted to merge redesigned motifs from Chinese women’s needlework craft into a textile art form using mass-produced garments that combines the historical with the contemporary to critically respond to the issue of mass-produced garments with a ‘Made in China’ label.

Framework

In summary, the concepts detailed in this section as applied to my thesis work are:

- Craft as an integration of function and aesthetics
- Art as a vehicle of critical attitude
- Integration of craft and art

- Needlework as textile art practice
- Raising social issues through craft and art

My thesis work approached needlework as an independent textile art practice that contains elements of craft, which integrated function and aesthetics, as well as art, which enabled a critical response to social questions. Integrating elements of craft from traditional needlework into my textile art practice, I applied craft techniques such as sewing, patchwork and embroidery as well as textile design techniques such as repeat pattern design to not only produce textile art but also create a garment art installation that evokes discussion on the issue of worker alienation during mass garment production.

Section 3: My Studio Practice

This section first outlines the research method I adopted for my thesis work, followed by a detailed description of the processes carried out to produce textile artwork that incorporates imagery from traditional Chinese needlework as well as garments produced using traditional needlework techniques that respond critically to the question of worker alienation in garment mass production in China.

Research Method

As a Chinese woman living in Toronto, immersed in both Eastern and Western culture, I identify and position my studio practice in a historical and contemporary context. I consider the process I adopted for my studio practice to be as significant as the artwork I created through it. My studio practice expresses the evolution of my fabric and garment art pieces through two steps—textile design and garment making. It also provides an account of my attempt to revive traditional Chinese motifs into contemporary textile design.

From my personal observation of current clothing and house ware in some cities in China such as Beijing, Wuhan, Hangzhou, as well

as here in Toronto, I have come to understand that Chinese motifs that are meaningful and culturally representative are gradually disappearing from textiles and garments produced in contemporary practice. Further, even though many from the current generation might be ready to accept and appreciate a revival of historical designs they might not be aware of the traditional significance of the designs. For example, people from China who viewed my textile designs at some exhibitions appreciated my attempts to combine traditional symbols with contemporary textile design. But, surprisingly, further conversation revealed that they were not familiar with the meanings and cultural significance of those motifs.

In my thesis research, I used a practice-based research⁶ method, where my research was interwoven with my practice. The two steps I undertook in my design process—textile design and garment making—are pictorially depicted in Figure 6 and Figure 7. Fabrics produced during the textile design process, which developed from my personal textile

⁶ Practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice (Candy 3).

design method based on motifs of traditional Chinese needlework, were used in the garment making process.

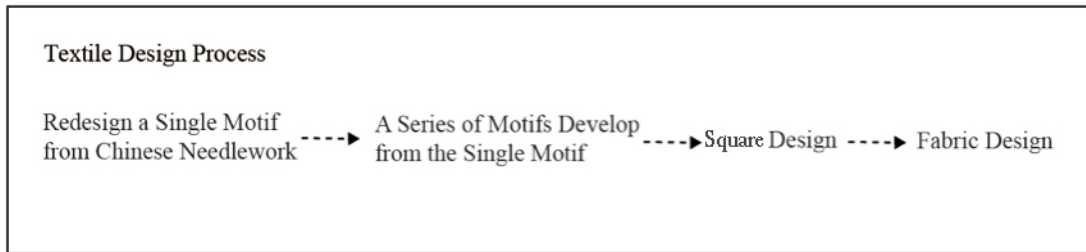


Figure 6: Textile Design Process.

The textile design process, as illustrated in Figure 3, comprised a consecutive series of textile practices developing from Single Motifs to Square Design to Long Fabric Design. I selected four motifs from thousands of Chinese needlework motifs portraying the diverse relationships women traditionally had with their family and communities. Through a process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, I redesigned the motifs and arrived at diverse designs for the four long fabrics that resulted at the end of this step. The next step was the garment making process, as illustrated in Figure 7.

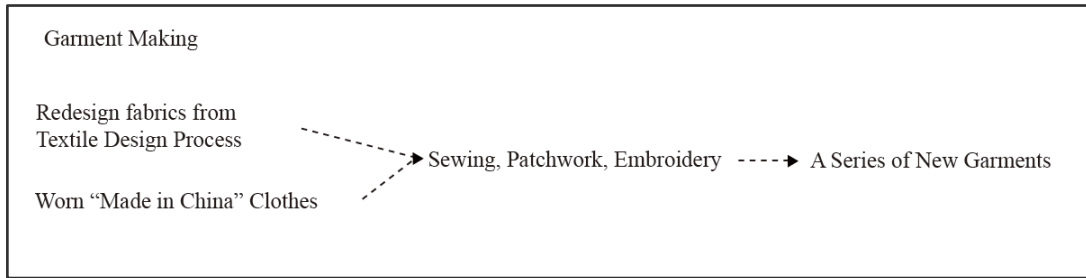


Figure 7: Garment Making Process.

Deconstructing the redesigned textiles and some discarded mass-produced 'Made in China' garments I reconstructed a series of new garments that blend the contemporary and traditional, mass-produced and handmade, West and East, deconstruction and reconstruction. In doing this, I use three techniques from traditional Chinese needlework—sewing, patchwork and embroidery. The processes I used for textile design and garment making are described below.

Step 1: Textile Design using Chinese needlework motifs

a) Selecting Four Motifs

For the first part of this project, I chose four motifs frequently appearing in traditional Chinese needlework. These are considered in

Chinese tradition to be auspicious⁷. Each of these four motifs has its own cultural meaning that holds a special significance for the different relationships Chinese women have with their family and society during different life stages (as discussed in Section 2.) Descriptions of these motifs based on Chinese culture as recorded by Zuding Li in his book *Chinese Traditional Auspicious Patterns* are given below:

Motif 1: Happiness and Longevity



Figure 8: Happiness and Longevity (Source: Li, 130)

The first motif I chose—‘Happiness and Longevity’— consists of a bat, two peaches, and two ancient coins (Figure 8). This pattern signifies both happiness and longevity since the Chinese words for “bat”

⁷ Auspicious symbols are those that are believed to bring good luck and happiness (British Museum).

(蝠) and “happiness” (福) share the same sound, and two coins mean “double” and wealthy in Chinese. Zuding Li has indicated that there is another version of this motif showing a bat flying near a branch of an immortal peach, accompanied by lucky clouds. This pattern also uses a homonym and symbolism to express a blessing for people. It is called “happiness and longevity will come together” (Li 130). This motif usually appeared on embroidered pouches, sachets, and clothes that women made for the celebration of a senior’s birthday, which reflected traditional women’s gratitude and respect for the elderly.

Motif 2: Top Three Among Flowers



Figure 9: Top Three among Flowers (Source: Li, 147)

The second motif is the ‘Top Three Among Flowers’ (Figure 9). Orchid, Jasmine and Sweet-scented Osmanthus are well known for their fragrance among traditionally famous Chinese flowers. Orchid is the best among ornamental plants; Jasmine is the best for manufacturing Chinese tea and Sweet-scented Osmanthus is the best spice for food. The best of them have the strongest, purest and the most lasting fragrance (Li 147). This motif usually appeared as decorative needlework pattern on objects such as pillowcase and quilt cover to express women’s hope of friendship and longing for a life of aesthetic pleasure.

Motif 3: Carps Jump over Dragon Door



Figure 10: Carps Jump over Dragon Door (Source: Li, 127)

The third motif, ‘Carps Jump over Dragon Door’ (Figure 10), derives its name from an ancient legend, which holds that every spring

thousands of carps come to the Dragon Door hoping that they can jump over it and become dragons; the ones that cannot, remain as fish. In course of time, this expression acquired popular meaning as a reference to candidates who succeeded in the Imperial Examination⁸. By using the expression, people praised them for their achievement and expressed hope that they would do better (Li 127). This motif was one of the most commonly used patterns in women's needlework figuring on bed curtains, cushions, baby bibs, and paper cuts for window decoration. In ancient China, only men were eligible to take the Imperial Examination, so such objects with the motif 'Carps Jump over Dragon Door' were usually prepared by women for the men in the family. Women's desire to bring good luck to their men for the Imperial Examination is condensed into this motif. In other words, this motif embodies and consolidates the relationship between women and men in a family and reveals women's eagerness for men's success in the examination so they could change their own destiny and that of the family.

⁸ The Imperial Examination was a civil service examination system in Imperial China to select candidates for the state bureaucracy.

Motif 4: Flourishing Melons



Figure 11: Flourishing Melons (Source: Li, 153)

The fourth motif, ‘Flourishing Melons’ (Figure 11), shows numerous small melons on a twisted, extending vine with butterflies flying around the melons; “butterfly” (蝶) and “small melon” (瓠) share the same sound in Chinese language. According to Li, the expression was originally used to signify that the people in Zhou Kingdom progressed and flourished after their pioneers in number and quality just like the melons (153). Subsequently, people began using it as an auspicious expression of their wishes for the prosperity of their descendants. They also use it to convey wishes for a good harvest. This motif was commonly used on objects such as embroidered money

pouch, bellyband, shoes insoles, sachets and New Year pictures created during the harvest festival or Chinese Spring festival. By incorporating this motif on their needlework objects as a symbol of fertility and of prosperity, women established strong relationships with the members of the family they married into.

Using the above four motifs as starting points, I redesigned patterns on silk, adopting techniques such as hand painting, silk screen printing and, finally, digital printing of the hand painted designs. In doing so, I aimed to endow these four traditional, and almost forgotten, motifs with new life in the context of contemporary western art practice.

I chose silk as the material for the printing because personally I have had an inherent and intimate familiarity with silk since childhood. The custom of passing on knowledge of cultivating silkworms from generation to generation still exists as a memorable ceremony in my family. My grandmother taught me how to cultivate silkworms and narrated stories about the process of silk production:

Silkworm → Silkworm cocoon → Silk reeling → Fabric weaving

Silk is a traditional organic material that originated in China. Silk is considered to have specific cultural and social significance in China. In his book *Chinese Silk: A Cultural History* published by the British Museum Press and Rutgers University Press, Vainker states its cultural and commercial importance as follows:

Silk is the stuff of commerce and clothing, a material for brilliantly decorating and finely protecting things, as a medium of artists, and, sometimes, a work of art itself. In China it also functioned as currency. It was an agricultural staple and a method of payment for taxes... Those who never wore it or had their houses furnished with it would have seen silk banners, decorations and costumes at local festivals and performances. Its presence in so many aspects of life gave rise to a high regard for silk as a raw product and also as an item of beauty. A goddess of sericulture existed as early as the Shang dynasty (c.1500-c.1050 BC), and her worship continued, though in a different form...(6).

My studio textile art practice combines traditional motifs from Chinese needlework with the contemporary and up-to-date printing technique of digital printing. In June 2015, I did a series of screen-printing experiments at Sparkbox Studio in Yerexville, Ontario. After comparing different printing methods, I chose digital printing for my textile art practice for the following reasons. First, my textile designs were hand-painted using watercolour, and the texture of watercolour can be better transformed onto silk through digital printing. Second, my textile designs contain abundant and meticulous details, which can be better expressed through digital printing than hand dying. Although my limited edition textile designs are implemented using digital printing, they are far different from the mass-produced digitally printed textiles.

b) Developing Square Design

Having selected the motifs for the project, the next stage was to develop the textile design for a square of repeat patterns. I researched and analyzed the technique of repeat patterns in square design of the

French brand Hermes⁹ and the Finnish brand Marimekko¹⁰. I chose these brands because they have a long history that reflects their own culture and those of other artists and designers that they work with around the world. I believe that the success of their approach is reflected in how they appeal to customers in the East as well as the West.

I began constructing the square designs by developing the four selected motifs as part of my own design language. For example, I re-designed the first auspicious motif - Happiness and Longevity - into a more geometric, creative and modern pattern after a series of modifications. Figure 12 illustrates the progression.

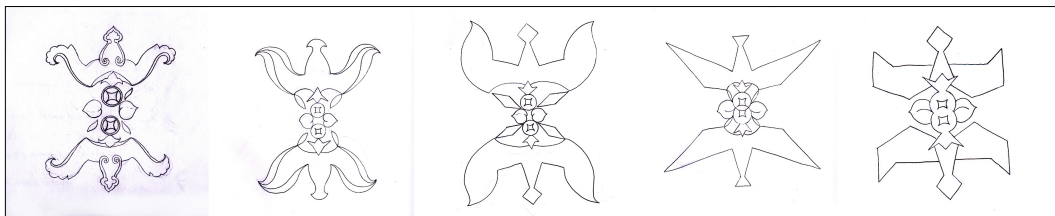


Figure 12: Development of the first auspicious motif - Happiness and Longevity. 2015.

⁹ Hermès is a French high fashion luxury goods manufacturer established in 1837, specializing in leather, lifestyle accessories, home furnishings, perfumery, jewellery, watches and ready-to-wear (Masidlover, n.p.).

¹⁰ Marimekko is a Helsinki-based textile and clothing design company well known for its original prints. Founded in 1951, Marimekko has helped people express their unique personalities through pattern and colour, with their high-quality fabrics, apparel, accessories, and housewares (Kemell-Kutvonen, Back cover).

After arriving at the final version of the developing sketches, I hand painted it with watercolour (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Final version of Happiness and Longevity, 2015, hand painted.

Next I deconstructed the final design into sub-motifs and developed a series of new elements according to the different themes and outlines of each motif. I then did a series of square design experiments based on the core motif and the new elements (Figure 14).

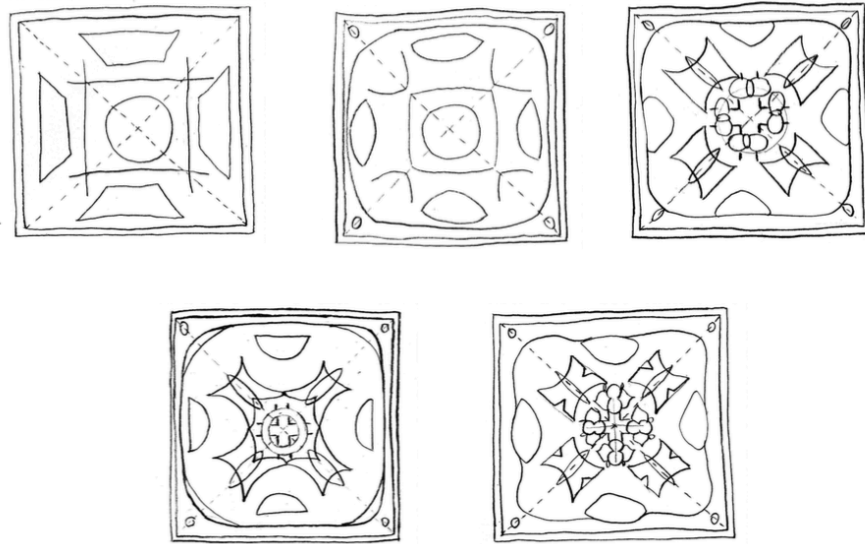


Figure 14: Square Design Experiments

Then I composited the motif and new elements and adjusted the details by central symmetry, free format, and rotational symmetry. After that I filled the background colour based on the redesigned motifs, ensuring adequate contrast between the motifs and the background at the same time. Four Square Designs based on the four themes that were derived from the four motifs, along with the draped form of the fabrics are shown in Figures 15 to 22.



Figure 15: Square design for theme Happiness and Longevity, 2015, hand painted.



Figure 16: Happiness & Longevity Square Design draped.



Figure 17: Square design for theme Top Three Among Flowers, 2015, hand painted.



Figure 18: Top Three Among Flowers Square Design draped.



Figure 19: Square design for theme Carps Jump Over Dragon Door, 2015, hand painted.



Figure 20: Carpds Jump Over Dragon Door Square Design draped.



Figure 21: Square design for theme Flourishing Melons, 2015, hand painted.



Figure 22: Flourishing Melons Square Design Draped.

I printed the four square designs on silk. Then, extracting motif elements from these square designs for each of the four themes, I experimented by combining the elements in a variety of ways to arrive at repeat pattern fabric designs as described in the next subsection.

c) Repeat Pattern Design

In order to place my redesigned motifs onto the long fabric, I began with studying the repeat pattern layouts. Different repeat types are introduced in different resources, for example, in *Mastering the Art of Fabric Printing and Design* published by Chronicle Books LLC. (Wisbrun 20, 21), there are four types of repeats:

1. Straight repeat: images form a grid following horizontal and vertical lines;
2. Brick repeat: images are moved halfway horizontally to the next image;
3. Half-drop repeat: images are dropped halfway vertically to the next image; and
4. Random/tossed design: images are randomly placed with no discernable pattern.

Yet another book, *Textile Design: The Complete Guide to Printed Textiles for Apparel and Home Furnishing*, published by Watson-Guptill Publications (Joyce 82-94) summarizes nine layouts frequently used in textile design:

1. All-over or tossed: the motifs are arranged in a variety of positions to achieve a varied but balanced effect;
2. Free-flowing: all designs must have a sense of balance, while some are evenly spaces, others have unconventional or asymmetrical layouts with a lot of flow and movement;
3. Stripe: a design in a stripe layout must be carefully planned, measured, and laid out;
4. Border: borders provide an opportunity for some of the most versatile layouts;
5. Set: the motifs are repeated in exact measured spaces, in either a square or half- drop repeat;
6. Scenic or landscape: worked on a horizontal layout and simulated a landscape of various outdoor themes, both rural and urban;

7. Handkerchief square: either in a diamond or a square pattern, looks like a number of bandanas or handkerchiefs, each with its own border, attached in a continuous pattern;
8. Patchwork: with a traditional set patchwork layout, follow the method for set layouts by making a graph of the required spacing;
9. Five-star: (also called a centre bouquet layout) generally uses one central motif, often a large traditional bouquet, repeated in a one-way, half-drop layout.

To compose my own textile design method incorporating traditional Chinese motifs on silk fabric as part of my textile art practice, I sought inspiration from the repeat pattern design of Marimekko. I studied Marimekko's textile design from the high-quality illustrations in the book *In Patterns: Marimekko* 2014. Marimekko's fabrics have various themes and subjects, from "serious" to "playful", "structured" to "unstructured", "geometric" to "organic".

I first broke the motifs into smaller elements and then used Repeat Pattern Design to create my own version of patterns and designs. I used the three features from this technique as described below:

i) Explicit Theme

Marimekko has the practice of inviting textile designers from all over the world to design fabrics for them. These designers elaborately name every piece of fabrics they create based on different themes. Some of the designers even spend weeks giving a name to the fabric. Some famous themes from Finnish culture are “Mustangi”, “Sonja”, “Unikko”, “Dadel” and “Guada”. Every fabric has its theme and every theme has its own inspiration and story.

I chose to name my themes based on the Chinese names of the four motifs, as:

1. *Happiness and Longevity;*
2. *Top Three Among Flowers;*
3. *Carps Jump Over Dragon Door;*
4. *Flourishing Melons.*

ii) Differences in Reiteration

A special feature of the Marimekko repeat pattern technique is that, although individual elements are repeated, they are repeated as groups which combine those elements in slightly different ways. As Marimekko's creative director Minna Kemell-Kutvonen discusses in *In Patterns: Marimekko*, Marimekko's customers have always enjoyed the choice between “striped or checked design, floral patterns or block colours, dressing up or dressing down” and yet, in all this diversity, Marimekko has focused on what matters most—helping people express their unique personality (Kemell-Kutvonen 6). From observing hundreds of Marimekko repeat patterns, I found that each pattern has its own unique composition; even groups of similar elements slightly differ from each single element, with some regularity for reiteration. Further, the colours in each theme are very different, with up to 12 different colours for each pattern. The colours are bright and vivid but not chaotic.

In my repeat pattern practice, I attempted to make the four long fabrics diverse to each other based on different themes. I tried to give

each of them an extraordinary graphical combination by adjusting the detailed motifs again and again. I created groups of similar elements slightly different from each other for repetition, based on particular regularity I observed from Marimekko. I selected different colours for each theme, as listed below:

- *Happiness and Longevity:*
 - black, topaz, sable, and jade;
- *Top Three Among Flowers:*
 - cardinal, burgundy, peach and black;
- *Carps Jump Over Dragon Door:*
 - peacock, Malibu blue, gold and poppy red;
- *Flourishing Melons:*
 - golden yellow, lemon yellow and navy.

iii) Concise but Delicate

As Kemell states, “We need dark to see light, grey to grasp color, work to notice playfulness, emptiness to appreciate life...Marimekko has always been about the visual impact of life’s many contradictions” (14). Marimekko addresses contradictions through applying contrasting lines,

shapes and colours in a harmonious composition. I brought about this contradiction in my repeat pattern design by reframing traditional oriental symbols such as vermilion carps and dragon doors, bats and peaches, butterflies and melons into a deconstructed and unconventional repeat pattern design that I developed from a Western textile design perspective. Besides, I also used contrasting colours in my design, such as the light sable, pink and jade with black background in Happiness and Longevity, and golden yellow with navy border and centre in Flourishing Melons.

Marimekko technique represents interweaving of western and eastern culture by combining clarity and functionality commonly associated with the West with emotion and prolific decorativeness commonly associated with the East. Marimekko tries to integrate some emotional and decorative motifs from the East into living spaces of Western life that are focused on functionality (Marimekko, n.p.). The use of a limited number of colours and abstract designs make the fabric appear concise and delicate. While creating the square designs earlier, I had tried to align my choice of primary colours with this principle.

Thus, rooted in my own culture heritage, I reframed and redesigned imagery from traditional Chinese needlework through a process of reconstruction and deconstruction, integrating traditional Eastern cultural heritage with contemporary visual art. For each theme, I selected one design from the many that I experimented with. I then developed it by adjusting the colour, size and direction of each element. Eventually, I arrived at four fabric designs, one for each theme. I selected silk as the material and printed the four long fabric designs, which are shown, along with their draped forms, in Figures 23 to 30.



Figure 23: Fabric Design for theme Happiness and Longevity; Hand Painted.



Figure 24: Happiness and Longevity – Long Fabric Draped.



Figure 25: Fabric Design for theme Top Three Among Flowers; Hand Painted.



Figure 26: Top Three Among Flowers - Long Fabric Draped.



Figure 27: Fabric Design for theme Carps Jump Over Dragon Door; Hand Painted.



Figure 28: Carps Jump Over Dragon Door – Long Fabric Draped.



Figure 29: Fabric Design for theme Flourishing Melons; Hand Painted.

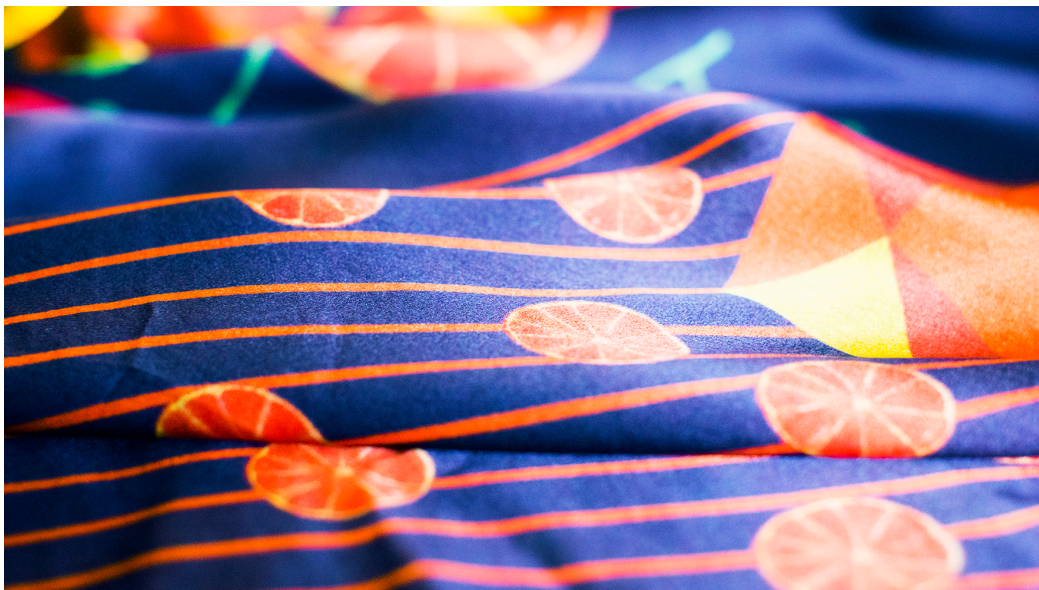


Figure 30: Flourishing Melons – Long Fabric Draped.

These four fabrics, besides standing by themselves as representations of my contemporary textile art practice, also provided the raw material for the next step in my thesis work, that of garment making, as described below.

Step 2: Garment Making

The Mingei movement, described earlier in Section 2 under the subsection on the Arts and Crafts movement, influenced my garment making. This movement encouraged the integration of traditional techniques and methods of craftsmanship into the contemporary art world. Accordingly, I used sewing, patchwork and embroidery from traditional Chinese needlework in my garment making. Further, just as Mingei “combined old and new, East and West, rural and urban in a compelling hybrid that sought to meet the new economic and social conditions of early 20th-century Japan” (Nakanishi 1), my garments combined old, worn mass-produced garments and new redesigned fabrics from the East and the West into a hybrid garment design.

The objective of the garment making practice was to produce a series of hybrid garments by integrating mass-produced clothing and my

redesigned fabrics to challenge people's perspectives on 'Made in China' garments. For this, I collected used and worn mass-produced garments of different colours from my friends and family living in Toronto (Figure 31).



Figure 31: Second hand Chinese mass-produced garments

Based on my garment design sketches shown in Figures 32 and 33, I sewed two garments using pieces from a black coloured mass-produced garment. Then, using colourful pieces from other old garments and from my redesigned fabrics, I created patchwork designs on the two garments that I had created and then decorated them with embroidery.

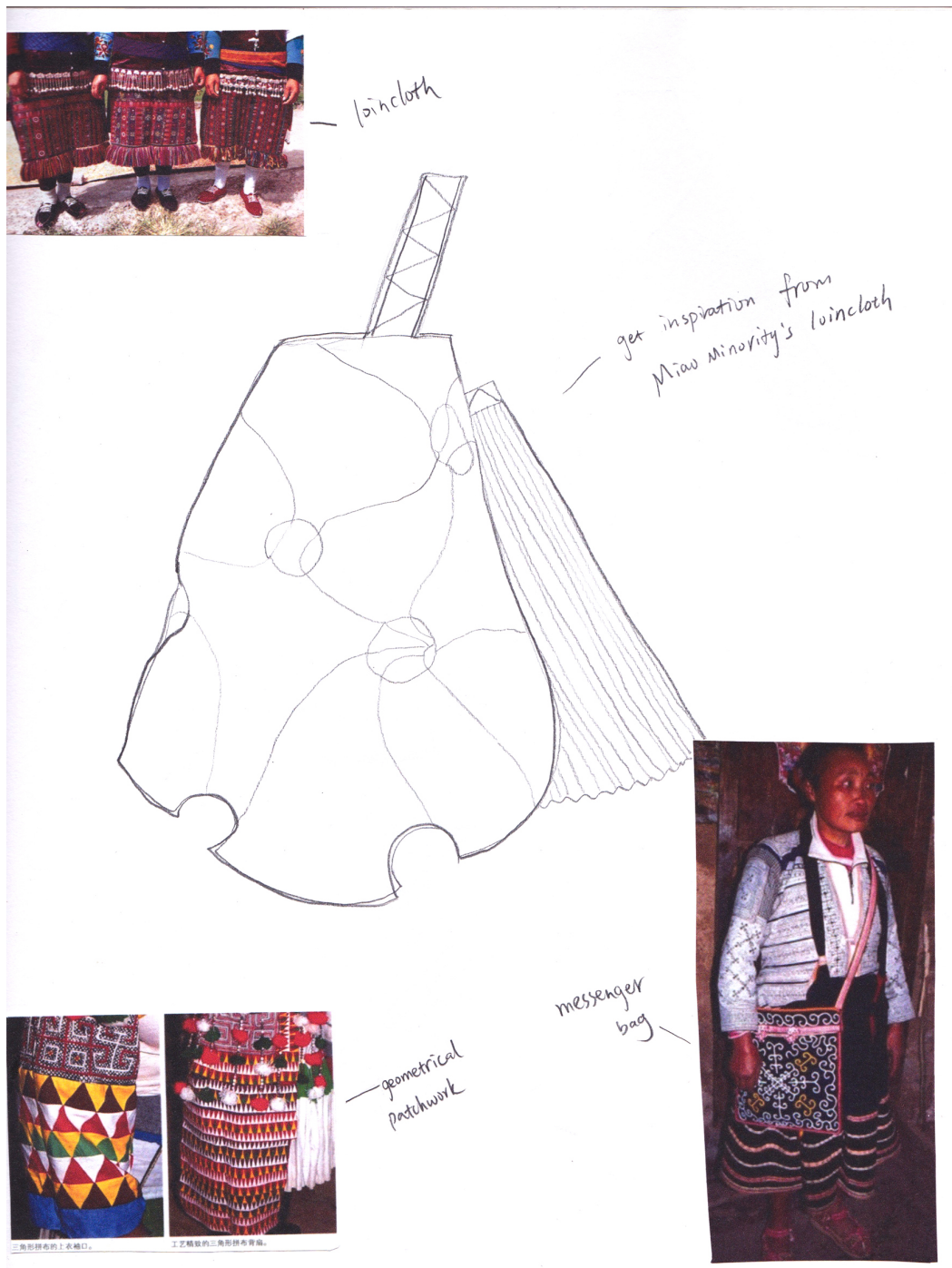


Figure 32: Garment design sketch – 1.



Figure 33: Garment design sketch – 2.

The process of using sewing, patchwork and embroidery techniques in the garment making process are elaborated below:

a) Sewing—Reconstructing Meanings

Sewing refers to the process of cutting, stitching and patching the fabric. It functions as a way to connect, interlace and overlap the fabrics by means of adjusting stitches as well as makes the rough selvedge of cloth neat. In my practice, sewing plays a foundational approach to compose new meanings by connecting the second-hand Chinese-made garments I collected and the textiles I designed. My reconstruction of the worn mass-produced garments and my redesigned textiles gives those clothes new life and meaning. Sewing helps in reconstructing new meanings from materials that originally had a different meaning within their original context. For instance, to address the issue of the ‘Made in China’ tag that stands out as an indicator of mass-production in the Chinese garment industry, I cut the second hand garments to construct a “hole” by developing upon pattern-making from Japanese designer-

Tomoko Nakamichi¹¹ (5), and hid the ‘Made in China’ tag inside the hole (Figure 34).



Figure 34: “Holes” constructed in the garment; ‘Made in China’ labels hidden in holes.

Hiding the tag is meant to imply the menial situation of the Chinese garment workers who produce those garments, which does not allow their identity to be imprinted on the garments they produce. As

¹¹ Having served many years as a professor at Bunka Fashion College, Tomoko Nakamichi currently delivers lectures and holds courses on pattern making in her native Japan, and internationally.

professor Jinhua Zhao mentions in his *The Chinese Fashion Industry*, the work of Chinese producers is potentially reduced to a tag marked ‘Made in China’ that is hidden from view.

b) Patchwork—Reassembling Memories

I began the patchwork process with sketch drawings that were inspired by patchwork art of Chinese Miao minority, Japanese Boro and Chinese Baijiayi, which are described in the following three subsections. Each of these represents a different culture context, but at certain points, they all reveal the transforming of waste into treasure through the creativity and autonomy of the poor and oppressed in history. In my garment making process, through the patchwork technique, I transformed pieces from worn mass-produced garments into textile artwork. My resulting textile art practice could be interpreted as a metaphor to release women workers’ self-expressed autonomy and initiative from the standardized apparel factories by reframing the waste into treasure.

Chinese Miao minority

For the Miao community, costumes with elaborate patchworks were a proud possession. Being dependent on swidden cultivation, they had virtually no personal possessions. According to Corrigan, their most valued possession was their richly woven and embroidered festival costume. The tradition of wearing several skirts or layers of jacket at festivals identifies them as belonging to a specific group, which can be considered the major living visual art form of the Miao culture (9).

Japanese Boro

The Japanese Boro scavenger-style technique was practised between 1850 and 1950 using leftover, indigo-dyed cotton or hemp fibres that were hand-loomed. The word Boro, in Japanese, means “tattered rags” and it denotes patched and repaired cotton bedding and clothing (Aggarwal n.p.). Patched up Boro textiles revealed much about the Japanese family’s living standards and the nature of the economy of their time. Boro clothes, predominantly worn by peasants and others of lower class, were crafted from cheaper materials; yet they were no less beautiful than the kimonos worn by the upper classes.

Chinese Baijiayi

The Baijiayi robe is another great example of patchwork. As per a Chinese folk tradition, when babies turn one month old, their mothers sew a Baijiayi robe (Figure 35) (also known as a Hundred-Families robe) by patching together pieces of cloth collected from the local community in the shape of an amulet, usually triangle, hexagon and/or octagon (Han Sheng Newsrooms 38) (Figure 36). The Chinese believe the Baijiayi to be a symbol of blessing and longevity that protects the baby from disasters as they symbolically wear clothes from different families. In this tiny garment, all patchwork and stitching is imbued with the dedicated mother's love and benediction. And every patched piece in a Baijiayi brings along a variety of memories and histories that then live together as a meticulously constructed, brand new story.



Figure 35: Baijiayi from the documentary - Chinese Costumes, 2015.



Figure 36: Patchwork for Baijiayi from the documentary Chinese Costumes, 2015.

In my art practice, I choose the patchwork technique that I am familiar with from my culture as the one of the main forms of expression. The fabrics for my patchwork came from the textiles that I

developed in the first step of my art practice, and from the worn Chinese-made garments that I collected from different people including my family and friends here in Toronto. The process of carrying out the patchwork is shown in Figure 37.



Figure 37: Doing Patchwork in My Studio.

c) Embroidery—Developing a Narrative

Chinese traditional embroidery is a craftsmanship of image creation on textiles by using needles as tools and threads as materials (Zheng 37). The function of embroidery is not merely to decorate the clothes or fabrics, but also to display the identity of wearers through the motifs (Hu 92). The tradition of showing identity through embroidery has a long history. For example, in Ming and Qing Dynasty (1368-1912 A.D.), there was a kind of embroidery called Buzi (a square of decorative fabric which is located at the front and back of the official uniform) on the costumes of officials to indicate different hierarchies of status and the power of the officials (Collins 134). The embroidered motifs clearly demarcated the ranks of different officials. The motifs of birds were for the civil officials, with the crane representing the first-class minister and the golden pheasant representing the second-class minister. The motifs of beasts were for the military officers, with the lions being used for first and second-class ministers and the tigers being used for the third and fourth-class ministers.

In my thesis project, I was inspired by another kind of identity recognition through embroidery from Miao Minority, that is, using embroidery to record history and belief. There is no written Miao language, so embroidery on their handmade textiles is one of their special ways of keeping track of the history and faith of the community and the individual. Gina Corrigan, who is a British photographer, educational filmmaker, and collector of textiles and costumes from Southwest China, and Tomoko Torimaru, a Japanese scholar, document the Miao women's work through notable exhibitions and books, and point at how their work served as a chronicle of their unwritten history.

Torimaru spent thirty years visiting more than one hundred and eighty Miao villages to study their textile and needlework techniques. In his book *One Needle, One Thread*, Torimaru notes that embroidery is a kind of documentation tool more than just decoration for Miao (7). He further states, "... with no written script, the Miao have long used textile making as their method of language to record their history and beliefs. Their techniques are an instrument of vocabulary...a way to connect

dialogues of the past to the present, a way to interact on a daily basis with the world” (8-18).

In her study of Miao textiles from China, Corrigan explains that the Miao possibly migrated around 5000 years ago from Huang He (Yellow River) basin into Guizhou province in the subtropical zone of Southwest China. She further states that the Miao were forced to continue migrating-into Thailand, Laos and Vietnam after Guizhou became an administrative province under the Ming dynasty in 1413 because of the invasion and encroachment of imperial military and other minorities (8). However, wherever the Miao migrate, their cultural recognition and collective memories are preserved in their costumes, which can be viewed from their festivals even today.

In my art practice, I drew inspiration from the Miao embroidery technique to restructure new garments from pieces of old garments and new fabrics. Through this, I attempted to commemorate their characteristic traditional approach of recording history and extending ethnic identity with textiles (Figure 38).



Figure 38: Use of Miao Embroidery Technique in my Garment Making.

Thus, one part of the garments I created is redesigned fabrics that reflect my individual expression, a reinterpretation of traditional Chinese needlework imagery; the other carries individual experiences but from unconscious, anonymous, and mass-produced garments industry workers. The contrast and coexistence of these two kinds of textiles in the garments I created would hopefully invite people to consider the relationship between the traditional and the contemporary, the individual and the mass-produced. Two garments I created are shown in Figure 39.



Figure 39: Garments Produced

The act of undertaking patchwork in my textile practice could be interpreted as a metaphor for the release of woman's self-expressed autonomy through transforming waste into treasure and questioning the duration of the relationship between human beings and the clothes they wear. I cut my own new fabrics and stitched them onto the garment I made from mass-produced clothing as a subversion of the fast fashion convention that used clothing deserves to be thrown out and new clothing deserves to be worn. The cut pieces from my own fabric are dedicated to the long-term relationship between the old and the new as opposed to the mass manufacturing of textiles in the fast fashion industry.

Furthermore, engaging in patchwork using pieces from my own fabric also represents my textile experiments exploring the potential variety of application of tradition symbols—from four single motifs to square design, then to long fabrics, and finally to patchwork.

The research method used and the processes carried out in my thesis work were described in this section. The transformation of motifs

selected from Chinese needlework into fabric and garment art was also elaborated upon. The next section provides concluding remarks.

Conclusion

From my observation of the current clothing and house ware in some cities in China such as Beijing, Wuhan, Hangzhou, and here in Toronto, Chinese motifs that are meaningful and culturally representative are gradually disappearing from textiles and garments produced in our contemporary life. As a Chinese woman, I find this phenomenon troubling; as an art practitioner, I attempt to integrate some of those cultural expressions into my independent textile art practice by reframing and redesigning imagery from traditional Chinese needlework.

In this spirit, the primary intent of my thesis work was to attempt to integrate of traditional imagery and techniques from Chinese needlework into my contemporary textile art practice through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction to bring about a fusion of the East and the West. In adopting this process, I hoped to infuse my cultural and personal identity as a Chinese artist into my art practice in the West.

Rooted in my own cultural background, I deconstructed imagery from traditional Chinese women's needlework and reconstructed new

fabric designs from them to create contemporary textile art. I further deconstructed the textile artwork I produced and incorporated pieces from them on discarded mass-produced garments from China using needlework techniques—sewing, patchwork and embroidery—to reconstruct new garment designs. Using these garments, I created an art installation as a critical response to the issue of alienation of women garment workers in China from the garments they produce, tagged with a ‘Made in China’ label. For this part of my thesis work, I drew inspiration from the work of contemporary Chinese female artist Yin Xiuzhen, who brings historical forms, techniques, and materials from traditional needlework into contemporary galleries and exhibitions and extracts ordinary objects of material culture in society to raise social issues through her needlework (Yin 16).

By focusing, through a contemporary lens, on Chinese needlework’s gracefulness, I attempted to subvert the common view, and stereotype, that garments made in China were cheap and, thus, create art forms that would trigger debates and questions about the concept of ‘Made in China’ in the minds of the audience in the context

of loss of worker identity and creative expression because of the mass-production of garments. Presented here are some pictures from the installation (Figures 40 and 41).



Figure 40: Pictures from Installation—1.



Figure 41: Pictures from Installation—2.

My textile artwork pieces are exhibiting at the Textile Museum of Canada's shop for two years. Figure 42 shows one of them in the shop.



Figure 42: Exhibit at the Textile Museum of Canada's Shop.

The Hard Twist fibre art exhibition from August 26, 2016 to January 17, 2017 at the Gladstone Hotel (Figure 43) has accepted my fabric artwork.

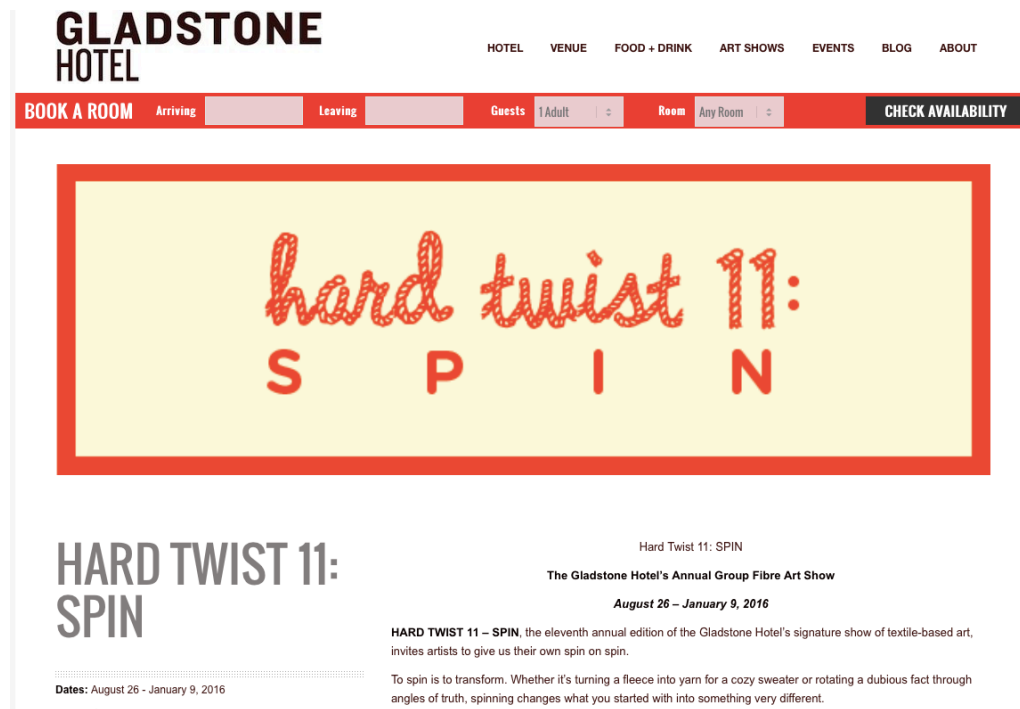


Figure 43: Hard Twist Exhibition notice

The picture at Figure 44 shows a portion of the large audience from the opening day of the exhibition. Figure 45 presents a lady who stood absorbed for a while in front of my artwork. It is heartening to see the local professional art community welcoming and appreciating my attempted fusion of the East and the West.



Figure 44: Opening Day at the Gladstone Hotel Exhibition—my fabrics on the right wall.



Figure 45: A Spectator Standing Absorbed in My Work.

Additionally, my textile artwork pieces have been accepted for exhibit at the Craft Show organized by Craft Ontario at Daniels Spectrum in Toronto from November 4 to 6, 2016 (Figure 46).

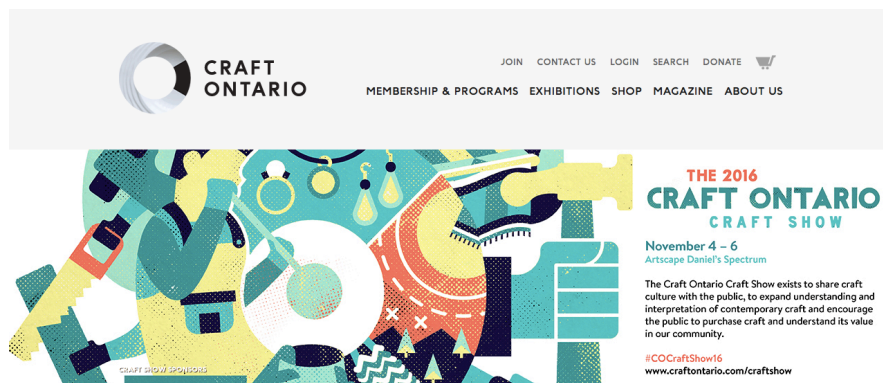


Figure 46: Craft Show at Daniel's Spectrum, Toronto.

In final summary, not only is my practice rooted in Chinese traditional needlework, but it is also nourished by my study of Chinese traditional needlework. My research into Chinese needlework culture and my studio practice in textile art and fine craft complemented each other in the execution of this thesis project. My textile art practice motivates me to engage further in research about the history and development of different motifs and techniques in Chinese needlework and the relation between women and needlework from a “material cultural perspective” within a given social context.

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