

Inquiry into auspicious embroidery in Ming–Qing apparel

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Abstract: During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the use of auspicious embroidery patterns on clothing was rich and varied, carrying profound meanings and holding significant research value. This paper analyzes the historical origins, artistic expression techniques, and applications of these patterns, exploring the artistic and cultural connotations they embody.

Keywords: Ming and Qing dynasties, auspicious embroidery patterns, historical origins, expression techniques, application

1. Introduction

A pattern is a decorative motif made up of dots, lines and planes. Auspicious patterns—also called “allegorical motifs”—are those whose imagery carries a wish for good fortune. Rooted in daily life, they possess a long history, rich content, plain-spoken charm and a distinctive artistic style. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, auspicious embroidered motifs appeared in abundance on costume, their unique visual grammar and traditional aesthetic sensibility testifying to the maturity and stability of China’s dress culture. This paper summarizes the representational strategies and applications of auspicious embroidered patterns on Ming-Qing garments, hoping to supply contemporary designers with reference, inspiration and raw material that can re-activate the vitality and creativity of traditional costume iconography.

2. Historical origins of auspicious embroidered patterns

The word “auspicious” (propitious) first appears in Zhuang-zi: “In an empty room white light is born; auspiciousness comes to rest.” The Tang-dynasty commentator Cheng Xuan-ying glosses: “Ji means fortunate events; Xiang means celebrative omens.” [1] The quest for lucky signs and “good omens” has thus long been a core component of Chinese culture.

Archaeological finds show that by the Spring-Autumn and Warring-States periods Chinese weaving and embroidery had already reached a high technical level; motifs included geometric meanders, S-curves, lozenges, dragons, phoenixes, Qi Lin and human figures. The Han dynasty inherited these traditions and made a leap forward: cloud-scrolls, animals, auspicious characters, floral and geometric patterns became common. The Six Dynasties regularised the formerly free cloud-scroll into a ruled, undulating framework that generated geometric divisions, further diversifying embroidery design. Tang embroidery absorbed foreign elements on the basis of tradition, creating luxurious, fresh and opulent styles such as scattered blossoms, roundel enclosures, pearl-roundel bands and symmetrical arrays. Song embroidery refined these into such rigorously ordered, quiet-toned patterns as turtle-back octagons, swastika water-scrolls and lock-mesh, developing ultimately into “painting-embroidery.” Ming embroidery displayed period characteristics: broken-spray, round flower, geometric and endless-scroll motifs—especially clouds, dragons, phoenixes, cranes, flora, birds and butterflies—robust yet formulaic. Qing embroidery, exquisite and varied, is usually divided into early, middle and late phases. Early Qing retained Ming geometry, small flowers and strict rules; mid-Qing favoured dense, brilliantly coloured designs influenced by European Baroque and Rococo; late Qing preferred large or broken-spray blossoms, bold and unconstrained.[1] Regional schools—Su, Yue, Shu and Xiang embroidery—set the fashion of the age.

Seen as a whole, auspicious embroidered motifs originated in the Shang-Zhou period, developed during Tang-Song and reached their zenith in Ming-Qing; by late Qing, virtually every figure on a garment carried a meaning, and every meaning was auspicious.

3. Artistic techniques of auspicious embroidered motifs

3.1. Meaning-Bearing devices

3.1.1. *Symbolism & Allegory*

Symbolism reads form and behaviour: pomegranates, swollen with seeds, stand for “many sons”; mandarin-ducks, mated for life, proclaim marital fidelity. Allegory recruits folk-loved figures or objects to state a wish—e.g., the Ming first-rank civil badge that sets a crane above waves to declare “a minister standing at court.”

3.1.2. *Personification (Likening)*

The brave tiger becomes “undaunted valour”; the one-horned xie-zhi that butts evil-doers embodies unflinching honesty.

3.1.3. *Pun & Emblem*

Pun trades on homophones: eagle-bear = “hero”, deer = “emolument”, bat = “fortune”. Emblem fixes convention—golden-crow for the sun, jade-rabbit for the moon.

3.1.4. *Letter-Insertion*

Auspicious characters—longevity, joy, nobility, blessing, luck—or whole couplets are woven into the pattern. A Tang silk shoe unearthed at Astana, Turfan (1964), carries “Rich and prosperous, fit for a prince; may Heaven prolong your life.” Motifs may also combine: three gui-yuan fruit threaded together = “placing first in all three palace exams”; five boys scrambling for one helmet = “five sons striving for the top laurel.”

3.2. Representational and abstract expression techniques

3.2.1. *Representational auspicious embroidery patterns*

Representational auspicious embroidery patterns primarily depict human figures, animals, plants, and combinations of animals and plants.

3.2.1.1. Human figure embroidery patterns

Human figure patterns are traditional embroidery motifs that use various traditional character image patterns to convey good wishes and aspirations. The most common human figure motifs include immortals, beauties, boys, celestial officials, the God of Longevity, and the “Hundred Boys” design.

3.2.1.2. Animal embroidery patterns

Animal embroidery patterns can be either complete representations or partial depictions. Complete animal motifs use the full form of an animal in various compositions, each carrying auspicious meanings. For example, the tiger, with its fierce nature and beautiful striped fur, is considered an auspicious creature symbolizing power and courage that can ward off evil (Figure 1).

Partial animal motifs use specific body parts as design elements, such as the tail of the Red-billed Blue Magpie, flying fish patterns, tiger tooth patterns, deer antler patterns, peacock patterns, and tortoiseshell patterns. The tortoise is regarded as a symbol of longevity, with the saying “a thousand-year-old tortoise.” The tortoiseshell pattern resembles the shell texture of a tortoise, forming a network of elongated hexagonal, octagonal, or circular shapes (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Tiger Pattern

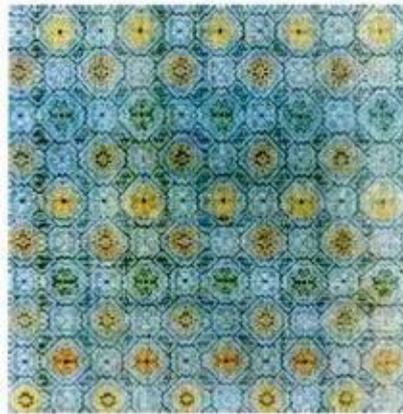


Figure 2. Tortoiseshell Pattern

3.2.1.3. Plant embroidery patterns

Plant embroidery patterns are the most numerous type among representational designs, with plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemums being the most widely used. The plum blossom, with its ability to withstand cold and its pure white blossoms, symbolizes steadfastness and integrity. When combined with bamboo, it creates the "plum and bamboo" motif, which represents young love and harmonious marital relations.

3.2.1.4. Combined animal and plant patterns

Patterns combining animals and plants were quite common on Ming and Qing clothing. These designs varied widely in form and meaning. A classic example is the "Phoenix among the Peonies" pattern, featuring a flying phoenix and blooming peonies. As the king of birds paired with the king of flowers, this combination symbolizes prosperity and good fortune. This motif was particularly popular during the Ming and Qing periods and often appeared on noblemen's and noblewomen's clothing and jewelry.

3.2.2. Abstract auspicious embroidery patterns

Abstract patterns combine objective forms with people's subjective wishes for good fortune. Based on their artistic form and auspicious meanings, these patterns can be roughly divided into special symbol patterns, non-objective linear patterns, and ideogrammatic patterns.

3.2.2.1. Special symbol patterns

Special symbol patterns are non-representational, non-character designs that resemble certain characters but are not actual characters. For example, the "卍" (wan) character pattern is generally considered a symbol of the sun or fire. Originally used as an amulet, it later became regarded as an auspicious symbol under the influence of Indian Buddhism (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The "Swastika" Pattern

3.2.2.2. Non-objective linear patterns

Non-objective linear patterns exist in abstract forms, usually based on straight lines that are then transformed into squares, rectangles, triangles, meanders, wavy lines, thunder patterns, and other variations. The thunder pattern, for example, gets its name from its resemblance to the pictograph for thunder. It features a neat, regular design formed by combining straight lines with meander patterns (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Thunder Pattern

3.2.2.3. Ideogrammatic Patterns

Ideogrammatic patterns convey meaning through thoughtful selection of elements and clever composition that suggest or imply specific messages. For example, two overlapping diamonds with a dot inside represent pregnancy (Figure 5).

4. Application of auspicious embroidery patterns on ming and qing clothing

4.1. Enhancing festive and ceremonial atmospheres

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, auspicious patterns were omnipresent in traditional celebrations: grand ceremonies, major festivals, prayer rituals, weddings, funerals, and other important occasions all featured clothing adorned with auspicious motifs.

For example, the bridal outfit known as the "phoenix crown and xiapei" (formal court robe) featured a large-collared, front-opening robe embroidered with phoenixes, symbolizing good fortune and prosperity. Brides also wore brightly colored wedding shoes, usually pink or bright red, with auspicious flowers embroidered on the toes, such as double happiness characters or peonies. The insoles often featured patterns of dragons and phoenixes together or other auspicious designs.

The magpie is considered an embodiment of good fortune in Chinese culture, believed to bring happy tidings. Most patterns related to "joy" feature magpies, such as the "joy on the brow" design. Mandarin ducks symbolize eternal love, representing monogamy, mutual affection, and lifelong companionship [3]. Patterns featuring mandarin ducks depict couples enjoying a relationship as harmonious as these birds.

4.2. Symbolizing social status

In feudal society, clothing patterns and colors played an important role in distinguishing between rich and poor, noble and common, serving as symbols of social status. For important occasions like ceremonies, celebrations, and sacrifices, strict dress codes governed what people of different ranks could wear.

For example, the Twelve Imperial Symbols and dragon and phoenix patterns represented power, position, and status and could only be worn by emperors or empresses. Beyond this, government officials used clothing to indicate their rank. In the Qing dynasty, civil officials wore patterns of birds such as cranes (Figure 6), golden pheasants, and peacocks, while military officials wore patterns of beasts such as lions, tigers, leopards, and bears.

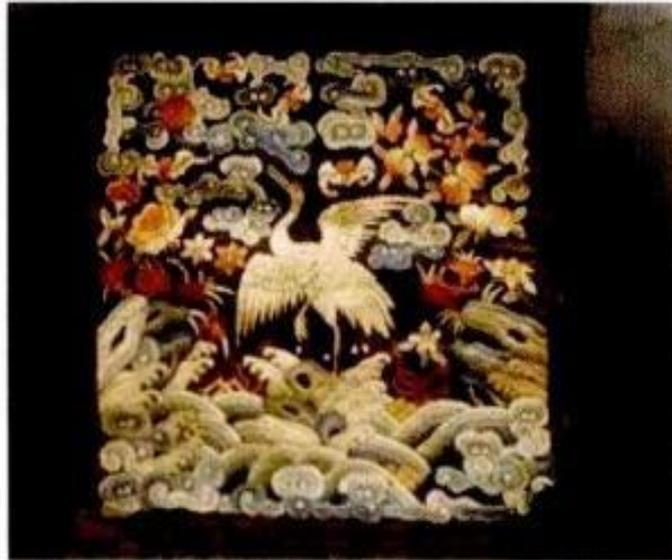


Figure 6. Crane Pattern

4.3. Bearing the belief in warding off evil and attracting good fortune

Since ancient times, ornaments with the meaning of warding off evil and protecting the wearer have gradually appeared, developing into many different forms, such as the "Five Poisons" bellyband, tiger-head hat, and longevity lock.

The "Five Poisons" bellyband directly embroidered the images of five poisonous creatures on the garment, visually expressing people's desire to ward off evil and seek good fortune (Figure 7). Although the specific composition of the "Five Poisons" varied by region—such as gecko, scorpion, spider, toad, and snake in northern Shaanxi, and tiger, scorpion, lizard, spider, and centipede in Zhejiang—the original intention of warding off evil and attracting good fortune remained consistent.

The tiger, as the king of beasts and an embodiment of strength and courage, was also considered a protector of humans. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, people used the tiger motif to protect homes and ward off evil, hoping that children would grow up as powerful and brave as little tigers. Tiger-head hats and shoes for children in the Central Plains region used tiger-head patterns to express the desire to avoid misfortune and wish children safe growth.



Figure 7 Five Poisons Pattern

4.4. Expressing the desire for offspring

In feudal society, low productivity and short lifespans created a constant need for more labor for hunting, defense, and production. Consequently, the fertility cult—prayer for many children—became an important aspect of people's beliefs.

Among plants with auspicious meanings, the pomegranate was particularly beloved. This was not only because of its round shape and fiery red color, but most importantly because it contains numerous seeds, symbolizing many children and abundant blessings. Here, "many children" specifically meant "many sons."

In the "Three Abundances" (San Duo) pattern—representing good fortune, longevity, and many sons—people used:

Buddha's hand citrus to represent "good fortune"

Peaches to represent "longevity"

Pomegranates to represent "many sons"

These three auspicious symbols combined became a representation of a happy and prosperous life [4] (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The "Three Abundances" (San Duo) Combined Pattern

Auspicious Motifs Symbolizing Fertility

In the culture of auspicious patterns, the lotus and fish are two important themes representing fertility:

Fish: A symbol of abundance and masculine energy.

Lotus: A symbol of femininity and strong reproductive power, as its rhizomes can continually sprout and grow.

Thus, the "Fish Playing in the Lotus" pattern symbolizes the union of man and woman and the hope for many children.

Additionally, melons are also seen as a symbol of unceasing progeny and are revered as sacred objects for pray for offspring. Strings of melons growing on vines directly represent "many children, many blessings," signifying the continuation of the family line and prosperity.

Therefore, in some folk weddings during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the clothes and quilts of the bride and groom were often embroidered with patterns or characters like "Continuous Melons and Young" and "Presenting Melons to Bless the Birth of a Child".

5. Conclusion

The auspicious embroidered patterns on Ming and Qing dynasty clothing are a brilliant treasure of traditional Chinese costume culture. Their development spanned history, beginning in the Shang and Zhou dynasties, evolving through the Tang and Song, and finally reaching their zenith during the Ming and Qing periods, forming a sophisticated artistic system rich in meaning.

Whether through expressive techniques like symbolism, homophony, and character embedding, or through forms that combine the concrete with the abstract, these patterns not only showcase the ancient craftsmen' s superb skills and unique aesthetics, but also embody the deep cultural pursuit of good fortune, well-being, and social order. They enhance festive atmospheres, indicate social status through dress codes, and be invested with the people's simple aspirations for warding off evil, attracting blessings, and ensuring the continuation of the family.

These patterns are not isolated artistic symbols, but rather a fusion of history, culture, and daily life. Their core characteristic—"Every design has a meaning, and every meaning is auspicious"—still possesses strong cultural vitality today. For modern fashion design, these auspicious patterns are not only valuable traditional materials but also a rich source of cultural inspiration. By translating their expressive techniques into modern forms and reinterpreting their meanings for contemporary audiences, these traditional motifs can be revitalized in a new context, ensuring the inheritance and continuation of traditional costume culture and infusing Chinese modern fashion design with a unique national cultural identity.

6. References

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