

# Aesthetic Qualities and Cultural Connotations of Chaozhou Embroidery

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**Abstract:** As a core branch of Cantonese embroidery, Chaozhou embroidery embodies a distinctive artistic identity shaped by the cultural landscape of the Chaoshan region. This article systematically examines its aesthetic system across four dimensions: form, imagery, craftsmanship, and culture. The analysis highlights how compositional principles of fullness, symmetry, vibrant coloration, and raised relief techniques construct a mature visual language. Its symbolic repertoire, including dragons, phoenixes, auspicious motifs, and narrative themes, translates cultural values into visual expression. Craftsmanship is explored through its extensive stitch repertoire, material innovations with gold and silver threads, and rigorous transmission practices that safeguard artisanal knowledge. The cultural dimension situates embroidery within local rituals, diaspora identity, and evolving practices of safeguarding and innovation. By interweaving tradition with contemporary creativity, Chaozhou embroidery demonstrates both resilience and adaptability, serving as a vital cultural emblem of Chaoshan heritage and a dynamic contributor to the broader discourse on Chinese and global embroidery arts.

**Keywords:** Chaoxiu Embroidery, Aesthetic Characteristics, Cultural Connotations, Inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

## 1. Introduction

As the core branch of Cantonese embroidery, Chaozhou embroidery occupies an irreplaceable position in the pantheon of Chinese embroidery arts with its distinctive artistic style and profound Lingnan cultural heritage. From the development of craftsmanship in the Tang Dynasty, to its flourishing during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and further to its inheritance and innovation in contemporary times, Chaozhou embroidery has continuously evolved over centuries, forming a distinctive aesthetic character. These artistic qualities not only carry the collective memory of the Chaoshan region but also embody the creative wisdom of folk art. This article systematically analyzes Chaoxiu embroidery from four dimensions—"formal beauty," "imagery beauty," "technical beauty," and "cultural beauty." Integrating the latest preservation practices with contemporary academic research, it comprehensively presents the artistic value and cultural vitality of Chaoxiu embroidery.

## 2. Beauty of Form: A Magnificent Visual Spectacle

The formal beauty of Chaozhou embroidery constructs a complete and mature visual language system, characterized by full compositions, brilliant colors, and vivid modeling, which together form a highly recognizable artistic style. This style originates both from the natural environment and local customs of Chaoshan and from the artisans' deep understanding of visual principles.<sup>[1]</sup>

In compositional artistry, the most representative technique is full embroidery, whereby dense patterns cover the entire textile surface, creating a rich and saturated visual effect. This concept of fullness reflects the Chaoshan people's cultural pursuit of "perfection" and "abundance."<sup>[2]</sup> For instance, Chao opera costumes often feature dragons as the central motif, accompanied by clouds, waves, and cliff patterns extending from the collar and sleeves down to the hem. Such layered yet integrated arrangements present a visual narrative

that manifests regal splendor while symbolizing the traditional cosmology of "heaven, earth, and humanity" in unity.



Figure 1. Chaozhou Embroidery  
Source: Internet

Symmetry and balance constitute another crucial principle, particularly in decorative pieces such as screens and wall hangings. These works often adopt bilateral or vertical symmetry along a central axis, conveying stability and solemnity. The classic motif Double Phoenixes Facing Peonies exemplifies this, where two symmetrical phoenixes face a central peony, surrounded by clouds and flowers arranged symmetrically yet varied in scale and density, thus infusing liveliness into order. Importantly, Chaozhou embroidery employs intentional blank spaces and contrasts between density and void, ensuring visual breathing space amidst fullness.



**Figure 2.** *Chaozhou Embroidery “Double Phoenixes Adoring Peonies”*  
 Source: Internet

The chromatic aesthetics of Chaozhou embroidery are characterized by a preference for saturated hues and striking contrasts, producing a distinctive visual intensity. Chaozhou

embroidery predominantly employs gold, silver, black, red, and green hues, evoking feelings of warmth, joy, brightness, and simplicity. The vivid color palette of Chaozhou embroidery is intrinsically linked to the regional colors of the Chaoshan area—a harmonious blend of the local natural landscapes and cultural heritage.<sup>[3]</sup> Common practice emphasizes strong juxtapositions between warm and cool tones, which accentuate decorative richness and enhance symbolic resonance. For instance, embroiderers frequently achieve subtle gradation by shading petals from darker bases toward lighter tips, thereby conveying depth and dimensionality. Similarly, the interlacing of metallic threads with dyed silk is employed to heighten luminosity, giving feathers and floral motifs a shimmering, lifelike quality. The incorporation of gold and silver threads not only amplifies brilliance but also reinforces the sense of opulence and ceremonial solemnity, distinguishing Chaozhou embroidery from many other regional practices. Such color strategies reveal both the technical sophistication of local artisans and the cultural preference for exuberant visual presentation, reflecting broader Lingnan aesthetic tendencies that valorize vibrancy and auspicious symbolism.



**Figure 3.** *Chaozhou Embroidery “Nine Dragons Screen”*  
 Source: Internet

The extensive use of gold and silver threads represents the pinnacle of Chaozhou’s color aesthetics. During the Qing dynasty, artisans even employed 24K gold hammered into threads, leading to the phrase “Chaozhou embroidery does not

fear fire.” These threads highlight contours and fill major motifs, creating shifting brilliance under varying light. On ritual garments, golden clouds and flames radiate sanctity, while in decorative pieces, metallic threads enhance opulence,

distinguishing Chaozhou embroidery from other regional traditions.

In terms of modeling, exaggeration and dynamism take precedence over strict realism, capturing the spirit and vitality of forms. Animal depictions are particularly striking: dragons composed with S-shaped curves exude power and agility, while phoenixes emphasize flowing, elegant tail feathers. Figures on opera costumes show full faces, elongated eyes, and graceful bodies, all outlined in succinct yet expressive lines to reveal identity and emotion.

The three-dimensionality of Chaozhou embroidery is epitomized in the raised embroidery technique, achieved by padding cotton or paper beneath the fabric to elevate motifs up to two centimeters. The award-winning Nine-Dragon Screen demonstrates this: dragon heads are shaped through successive stages-outline sketching, padding, gold-thread overlay, and detailed finishing-yielding sculptural forms of extraordinary visual impact. This transformation from planar stitching to relief-like modeling exemplifies artisans' profound material mastery and inventive artistry.

### 3. Beauty of Imagery: A Symbolic System of Auspicious Motifs

The imagery of Chaozhou embroidery is deeply rooted in Chaoshan cultural soil. Through abundant symbolic motifs and thematic narratives, abstract cultural concepts and

emotional aspirations are translated into tangible visual forms. The expression of Chaoxiu patterns transcends the constraints of time, space, and perspective. Through techniques such as abstraction and refinement, the designs undergo idealized transformations based on their overall compositional relationships, emphasizing the portrayal of aesthetic characteristics.<sup>[4]</sup> Beyond decoration, these motifs serve as vehicles of cultural inheritance and social communication.

The dragon-and-phoenix motif, the emblematic symbol of Chaozhou embroidery, embodies authority, auspiciousness, and harmony. Widely used in bridal costumes and festive décor, Dragon and Phoenix Bring Prosperity conveys blessings for marital bliss and family harmony. Compared with the solemn symmetry of northern embroidery traditions, Chaozhou dragons and phoenixes are more animated and flamboyant, their scales and feathers shifting with light, reflecting the lively temperament of Lingnan culture.

Auspicious motifs based on homophonic wordplay also constitute a central category. For example, Five Bats Surrounding "Fu" employs the homophony between "bat" and "blessing", while Magpie on the Plum plays on the homophone of "plum" and "eyebrow". Similarly, Pine and Crane for Longevity and Magu Offering Longevity express wishes for health and long life, particularly in celebratory contexts.



Figure 4. Chaozhou Embroidery "New Year's Day Offering"  
Source: Internet

The motif of Carp Leaping over the Dragon Gate symbolizes academic success and upward social mobility, resonating with the Chaoshan emphasis on education and perseverance. In line with the region's mercantile traditions, motifs such as Prosperous Business and Abundant Wealth emerged, extending auspicious imagery into commercial aspirations. Collectively, these motifs form a coherent symbolic lexicon of blessings.

Narrative themes further enrich the repertoire, drawing on mythology, history, and nature. Daoist-inspired motifs like Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea and The Banquet in the Jade Pool adorn screens and birthday panels, transmitting ideals of longevity and transcendence. Historical stories from classics such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms are embroidered into opera costumes, enabling audiences to engage visually with cultural narratives. Such narrative

imagery functioned as “visual textbooks” in pre-printing eras, serving vital educational roles.

Natural themes reflect the coastal geography of Chaoshan, frequently featuring waves, boats, and marine motifs. Local flora such as peonies, lotuses, and native fruits like lychees and longans symbolize abundance and prosperity. These motifs, often personified or allegorized, carry emotional symbolism—for instance, Mandarin Ducks on Water denotes conjugal harmony, while Three Friends of Winter extol resilience.

Embroidery also embodies emotional ties in family and community contexts. Mothers traditionally hand-embroidered bridal dowries, embedding affection and blessings in every stitch, turning garments into intergenerational cultural symbols. Similarly, birthday panels gifted by descendants manifest filial piety through motifs like Fu, Lu, Shou.

Contemporary Chaozhou embroidery expands imagery to encompass modern themes. Young inheritors such as Huang Xueling incorporate depictions of Chaozhou’s historic cityscape and intangible cultural heritage. Award-winning works like *Splendid Era* and *Dragon-Phoenix Wedding Gown* combine traditional motifs with modern design, revitalizing symbolic imagery for contemporary cultural expression.

#### 4. Beauty of Craftsmanship: Meticulous Inheritance of Artisanal Wisdom

The craftsmanship of Chaozhou embroidery lies in its complex system of techniques, materials, and processes, representing the cumulative wisdom of generations of artisans. Recognized in 2006 as part of China’s first batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage, Chaozhou embroidery’s technical sophistication is widely acknowledged.

The stitch repertoire is exceptionally rich, categorized into embroidery, padding, applique, patching, and inlay, encompassing over 200 specific techniques. Signature methods include two-needle dragon scales and five-scale stitches, where artisans coil golden threads into coin-sized discs layered to create shimmering, movable scales resembling those of real fish. Such techniques demand exquisite precision and years of practice. Spiral stitches replicate the texture of petals, while auxiliary stitches like bridging and couching enhance compositional transitions and contour clarity.



**Figure 5.** Chaozhou Embroidery Details of the dragon scales on the “Nine Dragons Screen”  
Source: Internet

Material innovation further demonstrates technical ingenuity. Beyond silk threads, Chaozhou embroidery makes extensive use of gold and silver threads, traditionally produced by wrapping precious metal foils around silk and hammering them into fine strands. The application of pure 24K gold threads in the Qing dynasty ensured enduring brilliance. Artisans employ different anchoring techniques to produce varied textures. Feathers and sequins enrich surface effects, particularly in bird motifs, where real plumage replicates lifelike texture, or sequins simulate jewel-like brilliance.

Production is meticulous and time-intensive, often requiring months or years. A piece like the *Nine-Dragon Screen* involves stages of sketching, padding, gold-thread application, and detailing, each governed by rigorous

standards. This “slow craft” ethos exemplifies the spirit of precision and perseverance.

Transmission follows the master-apprentice model, ensuring not only the transfer of techniques but also aesthetic values and experiential knowledge. Chaozhou currently counts several national and provincial inheritors, who cultivate new generations through workshops and competitions. Events like the 2023 Chaozhou Embroidery Skills Contest, featuring gold-thread, velvet, and bead embroidery, both preserve and stimulate innovation.

Contemporary efforts emphasize “innovation within tradition.” Educators optimize techniques for pedagogy, while regional development plans integrate digital design tools and intelligent technologies without displacing the essential handwork that preserves artistic authenticity. Intellectual

property protections, including geographical indication applications and coordinated judicial-administrative frameworks, provide institutional safeguards for artisans' creativity.

## 5. Beauty of Culture: A Living Embodiment of Chaoshan Spirit

The cultural beauty of Chaozhou embroidery manifests in its intimate ties to social life, historical memory, and cultural identity in Chaoshan. As a regional cultural carrier, it records local wisdom and aesthetic aspirations while serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity.

From the Tang dynasty origins to its Ming-Qing maturity, Chaozhou embroidery became a ubiquitous skill among local women, integral to dowry preparation and domestic life. During the Qing dynasty, embroidery workshops flourished, forming industrial clusters and exporting works across Southeast Asia via Shantou port. These cross-border exchanges amplified innovation and cemented Chaozhou embroidery's reputation, with works winning national and international recognition, including awards at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition.

Chaozhou embroidery is deeply entwined with folk rituals: festival banners, bridal gowns, birthday screens, and ritual robes all integrate embroidery as essential cultural expressions. Such practices extend embroidery's function beyond artistry to spiritual and communal roles, creating atmospheres of sanctity and celebration.

Through the migration of Chaoshan diaspora, Chaozhou embroidery traveled overseas, serving as cultural symbols in ancestral halls and community associations, strengthening diasporic identity and continuity. This intercultural diffusion highlights its role as both a craft and a form of soft cultural power.

Contemporary safeguarding operates through multi-level strategies: government planning, research institutions, demonstration studios, and intellectual property protections. Talent cultivation is equally vital, with local initiatives embedding embroidery into school curricula, training young practitioners, and encouraging their return to heritage industries after higher education.

Innovations expand Chaozhou embroidery's presence in fashion, technology, and media. Works like Splendid Era integrate embroidery into contemporary apparel, while exhibitions and digital media amplify public visibility. A particularly notable initiative, Embroidering the Ancient City

of Chaozhou, adapts embroidery concepts metaphorically for cultural heritage preservation, applying principles of overlaying, padding, and patchwork to urban conservation and revitalization, underscoring the methodology's modern cultural applicability.

## 6. Conclusion: Cultural Vitality in the Interweaving of Tradition and Innovation

The aesthetic system of Chaozhou embroidery constitutes an organic unity of form, imagery, craftsmanship, and culture. Its abundant aesthetic qualities reflect both the natural-humanistic features of the Chaoshan region and the quintessence of Chinese embroidery traditions. As a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, Chaozhou embroidery faces the dual challenge of shrinking traditional demand and expanding contemporary opportunities. Yet through protective policies, intergenerational transmission, and design innovation, it continues to thrive.

The value of Chaozhou embroidery lies not only in its artistry but also in the cultural memory and identity it embodies. From historic workshops to contemporary classrooms, from local rituals to international exhibitions, it remains a living vessel of Chaoshan culture. Its trajectory demonstrates that the vitality of tradition rests upon continual dialogue with modernity: by remaining faithful to its essence while adapting to new contexts, Chaozhou embroidery continues to illuminate the path of Chinese embroidery and contribute wisdom and solutions to global craft development.

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