The Revival of a Cultural Heritage: *Hangzhou Embroidery and its Development Today*

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**Abstract.** Hangzhou embroidery is a traditional embroidery handicraft in China. As a cultural heritage, it had a long history and faces a precarious situation today. The preservation of Hangzhou embroidery faces several challenges, including product marketing, business model and technological presentation. The leading role of preserving Hangzhou embroidery, Yi Hui Co.Ltd, are trying application of new technologies and organizational strategies. Nevertheless, it is not only the form, but also the content, the process that embedded the spirits of creating an artistic handicraft should also be preserved. The interaction between cultural heritage and technology and social context is key to its preservation and development.

1. **Introduction**

The correlation between preservation of cultural heritage and the interdisciplinary approaches to their future development has been a topic of intense discussion in China recently. Many institutes, universities, NGOs, private corporations and government agencies have been involved in this endeavor. The preservation of cultural heritage requires the application of new technologies and organizational strategies. Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, inevitably faces the challenge of regaining its own sustainability. It is not only the form, but also the content, that matters when we preserve our heritage. This paper will examine the current efforts for the preservation of Hangzhou embroidery – an ancient Chinese handicraft now in danger of extinction. What should be preserved is not just ancient skills and processes of a handicraft, but also its aesthetic and visual content transformed and implanted in new mass produced commodities.

2. **Hangzhou embroidery**

Hangzhou embroidery is one of traditional embroideries in China\(^1\). It first appeared almost 2000 years ago. Hangzhou, known in ancient times as Qiantang, has always been the capital of Zhejiang province, famous for its silk industry throughout the history of China. It provided the perfect environment for Hangzhou embroidery’s development. When Hangzhou became China’s national capital during the Southern Sung dynasty (1127-1279), Hangzhou embroidery reached its peak. Since that time, this special embroidery technique was available only to people inside the royal palace. For the centuries that followed that time, Hangzhou embroidery became increasingly popular among ordinary people as the civic market began to flourish. Another reason for its popularity among the merchant classes was the increasing demand for religious objects by local Buddhists. Hangzhou embroidery was renowned

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\(^1\) The most famous four types of traditional embroideries in China are: Su embroidery, Yue embroidery, Xiang embroidery and She embroidery, all named after the provinces where they are originated. And Hangzhou embroidery is name after the city of hangzhou.
for its use of Buddhist iconography as well as secular images.\(^2\) (Figure.1) The decorative and ritual objects in local temples and private houses required lots of fabric embroidery handicraft.

![Figure.1. Li Delian and Yao Dezhen, *Miao Fa Lian Hua Jing*, 44.1cm x 1953.3cm, 1355-1361, details.](image)

At the beginning of 20th century, embroidery was mostly applied to clothing and accessories for the general commercial market. In 1950s, the local government started a factory to produce traditional opera costumes with Hangzhou embroider, in order to re-employ the embroidery artists who lost their careers during the years of warfare in the previous decade.\(^3\)

According to the definition of ‘intangible heritage’ by UNESCO, the knowledge and skill to produce traditional crafts is an important aspect of cultural heritage. Preservation of heritage as a living tradition passed on from one generation to the next becomes far more important than the preservation of the objects themselves. The current situation of Hangzhou embroidery is quite similar to that of most ancient handicrafts all over the world. Less than ten Hangzhou embroidery masters are still working today.\(^4\) There are many reasons attribute to its decline: inefficiency and complexity of the manufacturing process, lengthy apprenticeship but low payment afterward, massive changes in both environmental and social system of the region, shift from agricultural economy to industrial economy, the consumer market, etc.

\(^2\) A piece of embroidered Buddhist scripture, *Miao Fa Lian Hua Jing*, 44.1cm x 1953.3cm, dated 1355-1361, made by Li Delian and Yao Dezhen, is now in Shanghai Museum, China, Figure.1.

\(^3\) In 1956, Hangzhou government founded Hangzhou Jin Xiu Corporation, later developed into Hangzhou Costume Manufacture, recruited several Hangzhou embroidery masters, including Wang Guirao, Zhang Jinya, Lou Baotu, Yang Ballin, Yang Rongsheng, etc.

\(^4\) Among the masters of Hangzhou embroidery, Chen Shuiqin and Zhao Yijun are in their 70s, Jin Jiahong and Yu Zhiyin are from the younger generation. Jin Jiahong published several papers on Hangzhou embroidery and now is the secretary of China Embroidery Art Committee.
However, the situation for another traditional branch of embroidery in southern part of China is completely different. Two hundred miles north of Hangzhou, a town called Zhenhu and its surrounding region is famous for its Suzhou embroidery industry. Suzhou embroidery has been well preserved and highly developed in the last few decades. With the support from Jiangsu province, Suzhou embroidery was identified as national intangible cultural heritage in 2006. It has become an important financial resource for that region. It is in mass production and there are over 10,000 women working as professional embroiderers there. Most of the orders are from the Internet. Even the Chinese government commissioned special pieces of Suzhou embroidery for diplomatic purposes. It seems that is the solution for reviving embroidery in a modern context requires reforming the industry, building a “brand” image and targeting the right clients. Will the solution for Hangzhou embroidery be the same?

3. Yi Hui Co.Ltd
One of the leaders of the movement to re-establish Hangzhou embroidery is a local company called Yi Hui Cultural Creativity Co. Ltd.. The owner had a family embroidery factory for over twenty years and formed the new company in 2013. With the financial support from the family business, the new company has developed rapidly during last five years as so called a social company. Preserving Hangzhou embroidery is the explicit purpose of the company. The company combines multiple approaches to build an integrated system of industrialized embroidery production:

3.1. Cooperation with government, real estate group, non-profit organizations:
Yi Hui also works closely with government, real estate group, non-profit organizations to promote the Hangzhou embroidery industry. Their products were given as official presents by Chinese government in several important political events, such as G20 summit in 2016 and China-Arab States Expo in 2017. Hangzhou embroidery works, created by Yi Hui, were included in the collection of the permanent mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations office in Geneva. The company has developed new decorative products for the household market with a real estate group as

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5 The company is named after the CEO, Ms. Chen Yihui. Her grandmother used to be a embroider and founded an embroidery business, which was inherited by Chen Yihui’s mother later. Chen Yihui was appointed to be the CEO of Yi Hui Cultural Creativity Co. Ltd. by her family.
partner. In 2015, International Silk Union (ISU) was founded in Hangzhou, the Yi Hui corporation joined it as a member of ISU History Culture Professional Committee.

3.2. Exploring the new market both in and out of China.

Yi Hui is exploring new markets both in and out of China. The company is currently selling traditional embroidery objects as souvenirs to the tourist industry market which provides basic revenue for the company. It works in cooperation with Shangri-La Hotels and Resorts Group to expand its global trade. In August 2017, there was a business tour of Shangri-La Hotel and Resorts Group held in Hangzhou Midtown Shangri-La Hotel. The tour included 32 domestic hotels and 22 foreign hotels and over 200 guests attended the event. Yi Hui was invited to hold a charity embroidery show during the event.

3.3. Develop a new system of production by updating design, manufacturing line and brand image.

Hangzhou is the center of e-commerce of China. With the support of big data and highly developed delivery service systems, Yi Hui is effectively connected to a complete system for the supply of raw materials, mass production lines, efficient delivery services, and point-of-purchase retail counters. Another challenge is to update its artistic style to meet new customers’ taste. Even though the traditional visual elements in Hangzhou embroidery are most well known, such as Baoxiang flowers, birds, butterflies and images of Buddhism, etc., it is quite difficult to attract young buyers and high-end clients. The Yi Hui Ltd. works with young designers, trying to develop new brand image and new products. Besides typical items such as clothes, purses, bags, shoes and scarves, the owner of the company is also looking for opportunities to combine embroidery with different kind of products. For example, notebooks, memory stick, etc.
3.4. Developing public education and market awareness.

Seeking new exhibition venues and greater access to technological resources for promotion and public education, the company has now launched a new gallery space in the historical Canal Region of Hangzhou. They are currently looking for opportunities to work with media artists and visual communication designers – searching for new ways to show the ancient story of embroidery, and let visitors experience the process of making embroidery with VR and interactive technology.

3.5. Engaging charity and education, especially recruiting deaf mutes to study Hangzhou embroidery.

Yi Hui has cooperated with local special education schools to train disabled people with embroidery skills. Qualified students could work for the company after graduation. It also founded a private fund in 2017 in order to promote its charity.

4. The Challenges for embroidery as cultural heritage

One of the most unique techniques of Hangzhou embroidery is gold thread embroidery: the gold thread wound parallel to the surface of silk and red thread is used to fix them at certain points. Imagine
the shining gowns of antiquity with these embroideries on them. Now, in the exhibition hall, audiences can see the gold thread shining as if golden light is floating on the surface of the cloth under a moving light. This beautiful embroidered fabric exhibits a sense of richness and luxury that is unparalleled. However, this specific pattern is still of a traditional aesthetic taste. It is likely to be buried among other embroidery patterns and forms, for most of the visual images of Yi Hui’s products are flowers, birds, landscape. It represents the taste of the major body of Yi Hui’s clients. Yi Hui is considering improving their brand and product design, but a bigger challenge is whether Hangzhou embroidery could be inherited as a rare handicraft or converted into a modern product. If the gold thread embroidery, for example, could be re-designed, it could certainly exist in a different context, including company brand logo, website, commercials and a variety of other products. As the core artistic element of the whole brand, both the historic cultural heritage and modern visual transformation of a traditional embroidery pattern might be easily recognized and embraced by customers, especially the younger ones.

The company developed new and more modern designs but didn’t continue the practice. They were aware of the advantage of a transformative design but also worried about the result this may cause. There was something deeper in the understanding of this cultural heritage that made the company vacillate. First, from the company’s point of view, using a new design meant a complete reshuffle of the product series, and its potential for the exploration of new markets. Secondly, the Yi Hui’s CEO insists the best way of preserving this heritage is not only selling abundant of embroidered bags or fans but also retaining the process of hand making. According to UNESCO, the handicraft skills and techniques are integral parts of intangible cultural heritage. Is this traditional handicraft technique of Hangzhou embroidery able to re-establish itself in the marketplace, or must it be transformed into a mechanized process? Is there a new product that could present both its visual beauty and historic value? Would consumers be interested in such a product? What is the best way to preserve and propagate an authentic cultural heritage? How can the Internet be used for marketing a newly invigorated cultural tradition? What contemporary issues might influence the traditional designs of Hangzhou embroidery? To what extent can the visual effect of embroidery be retained? The company is actually in a turning point in its decision making process of how and what to preserve.

The Yi Hui company faces a dilemma: supporting the embroidery masters through the successful use of mass production leads to a possibility of losing the essence of the handicraft of embroidery, but reviving the cultural heritage of Hangzhou embroidery only by supporting those embroidery masters who keep small-scale studios is not economically feasible. The local government of Hangzhou once offered financial support to some of the embroidery masters, hoping they could recruit more apprentices to inherit their skills. Unfortunately, no more than five Hangzhou embroidery masters are still working now and they are known by few people. Some tried to work with local art schools, for
instance, teaching some techniques in fashion design department or textile departments. Both of these strategies proved not to be viable in preserving Hangzhou embroidery. The success in preserving Suzhou embroidery industry is on account of numerous reasons including geography, cultural history and the differing economic structures of the two regions.

5. Form and content

There is an important question of how cultural heritage’s development could be parallel to that of technology. Consumers’ visual experience has been greatly changed by new exhibition technology and new forms of design and art, such as interaction design, integrated design, inter-media art, digital art, programming art, etc. Curating an exhibition is increasingly seen as another form of artistic creation. Yi Hui is currently developing a new exhibition plan for Hangzhou embroidery, which will apply interface touch screen, virtual reality and interaction design to show the process of making embroidery. There is mounting concern in the company that the delicacy and tranquility of hand making is easily overwhelmed by dazzling digital effects. The best way to experience embroidery is to hold the needle and to sew a pattern on a piece of cloth. Touch screens are for interaction between human and machines, but are not real materials. Visual communication design is effective for presenting information and history, essential aspects in public education programs, but do not, in and of themselves, lead to increased sales and revenue. Advanced technological tools for marketing and education involve a large capital investment for initial programming and installing digital devices. The technological expenses of mass production re well established and seem justified. The enhancement of marketing an important part of Chinese cultural heritage remains a central concern. The extent to which technology could be involved in the preservation of Hangzhou embroidery remains uncertain.

![Figure 8. A piece of gold thread embroidery in detail.](image)

Cultural heritage could be interpreted and effectively preserved even without any of these fascinating technologies. Mass media and social networking offer alternative methodologies to conventional marketing techniques and exhibition driven publicity. The film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, directed by David Gelb, is the story of 85 year-old Japanese Sushi master Jiro Ono and his heir. Through this film, not only the 3 star Michelin Sushi bar but also the spirit of the master and his followers came to be viewed by a large public as the symbols of mastery of the art of one’s work and a lifelong pursuing perfection – an important part of cultural heritage. Similar productions might capture the same spirit of Hangzhou embroidery and many other forms of handicraft. The use of current mass media technology raises questions about the necessity of using new technologies to present Hangzhou embroidery.

The relationship between the master and his son is a touching and compelling aspect of Gelb’s *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. The connections and conflicts between the father and son, between human and
nature, make the story even more complicated but add heightened interest and human emotion. If we look into the relationship between embroidery masters and their apprentices, we will very often find similar stories. A cultural heritage like Hangzhou embroidery, or Jiro’s Sushi consists not only of the objects, but the process making-process, and a living physical, social and psychological human activity. How could technology preserve that? What connection could technology have to building the very human connection between ordinary viewers (consumers) and this craft in a short period of time? The sushi bar of Jiro Ono preserves its great cultural traditions, while becoming extremely successful financially. Its customers now need to make reservations at least one month in advance. The film obviously contributed to its popularity. To enjoy a splendid sushi service once in Jiro’s bar is more than just a meal, but like a journey of experiencing the most precious spirit of mankind which rarely exists in our daily life. How could embroidery be interpreted in that manner? It is clear that film and social media can shape public awareness of its cultural heritage. Film is of course a technological innovation in itself, but it may be argued that it is the human expression – the art of film – rather than its technological spectacle that makes it a powerful tool for cultural awareness. The next wave of technology, that is to say, the emergence of artificial intelligence, challenges all forms of traditional culture, cognition and human behaviors. It seems essential that we struggle to retain our own sense of human spirit when we try to deal with it. With the ever expanding and increasingly rapid advance of technology, the most essential character of our own heritage is likely to be disseminated to the public. What is the essential aesthetic value of art of traditional embroidery – of any cultural heritage? How can it be adapted to the contemporary world in a cross-cultural and an interdisciplinary context?

6. Conclusion
By the end of 2016, there are 39 elements corresponding to China are included in UNESCO International Cultural Heritage lists. There are 52 World Heritage properties are presently located in China and over a thousand cultural heritage sites are recognized and supported by Chinese government. New technologies and successful business modes are being applied to the preservation of these national legacies. Many of these cultural heritage sites will face questions of the same kind that Hangzhou embroidery has been trying to answer. The question of whether technology would have a positive or negative impact on cultural heritage echoes our fear for the uncertainty of the role technology would play in the future of humanity. To revive the whole industrial production of Hangzhou embroidery, or any other cultural heritage, is an equally difficult question. Preserving cultural heritage not only protects the fading stories of our past but also reshapes our images for future generations. Even though the power of digital revolution is formidable, an ancient handicraft will be an important part of the definition of humankind, for we are not going to be digitalized in every way.

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