

# UC Riverside

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Power of Chinese Embroidery

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### **Author**

Du, Justine

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POWER OF CHINESE EMBROIDERY

By

Justine Du

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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APPROVED

Dr. Yong Cho

Department of Art History

Dr. Begoña Ecgeverria, Howard H Hays, Jr Chair

University Honors

## ABSTRACT

Within the Chinese American community, the art of embroidery is often valued as a way of forging one's connections with Chinese history and culture. As a form of traditional textile craftsmanship, the knowledge of embroidery is often passed down through generations within a family. How does the act of creating a work of embroidery—which is, after all, simply a piece of cloth—instigate the process of constructing one's lineage and cultural identity? This project investigates the various aspects of embroidery—its technique, materiality, and design—in order to understand how the embroiderer's choices in the process of embroidering dictates and shapes the meaning of the resulting work. The Chinese American embroiderer often chooses the type of stitch, material of the fabric, and the pattern to create an artwork with the specific intentions of portraying and constructing one's own cultural identity. In this project, I demonstrated the power of embroidery and captured its cultural significance by creating my own work of embroidery. In doing so, this project demonstrated how it can be worthwhile to analyze the technical and material details of an embroidered cloth congruently as a way to understand this art medium's power to preserve the embroiderer's intergenerational memories and cultural identity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

What is the first thing that you think about when you look at Chinese embroidery? Is it how beautiful the artwork is, the meaning behind it, or its ability to bridge the gap between cultural identities and weave together tradition and humanity? These are all the things that Chinese embroidery is capable of doing. How is a piece of cloth capable of having such a huge impact on someone's journey to forging their cultural identity? Every detail and decision made regarding embroidery has a meaning: from the type of stitch to the kind of fabric.

## BACKGROUND

Chinese embroidery resonates differently with various people, and there are many ways to use it to benefit your life other than being just a hobby. My capstone project aims to demonstrate that people can use different and unconventional means to achieve the goal of connecting with one's lineage and culture and forge their cultural identity. There are numerous ways that this can be proven but my demonstration will focus on Chinese embroidery and Chinese Americans' capabilities of connecting with Chinese culture.

For this project, I will be using Su Xiu (苏绣) as the main technique. Su Xiu, is one of four biggest types of Chinese embroidery that is used throughout history and carries regional significance. Embroiderers primarily use Su Xiu to create realistic flowers and landscapes and double-sided imagery due to the immense amount of detail this technique provides. 晓然, xiao ran, states that Su Xiu was predominantly used during the Qing Dynasty in clothing, fans, decorations, etc. It was considered a luxury to have an embroidered piece as it takes a lot of labor to create and every piece holds its own meaning and value. The significance of using Su Xiu in this project is due to the fact that it is a Northern technique which is where my grandfather originated from.

A precedent case of using Chinese embroidery to bond with what is important is when Chinese women used embroidery to Buddhism. Buddhist nuns often felt like they were able to feel a strong connection with Guanyin (Buddhist deity) using their body to forge a connection. Throughout history, women started doing “feminine” dedications to Buddhism to feel more connected to Guanyin, one of them being embroidery. Nuns often embroidered Buddhist scriptures and Guanyin with their hair. Hair during this time period was viewed as precious and should not be cut unless it is for mourning or death. This act showed the dedication that nuns had for Guanyin by “Attending to the fabrication and use of "women's things" by secular women, Li offers new insight into the relationships between worshiped and worshiper in Buddhist practice” (Li pg2). This portrays that Chinese embroidery is not only culturally relevant. It is also emotionally and mentally significant to the embroiderer. This has inspired me to also include strands of my hair into my embroidery to also portray both my dedication to understand my culture and the emotional and mental significance of embroidery in this project.

After I completed my project, I burned the embroidered artwork. In Chinese culture, there is a tradition where people burn valuable things made of paper or things that are close to the deceased, clothes, personal belongings, etc., in order to give the deceased a better afterlife. The New York Times article states that, “The living pay homage to their deceased ancestors and in-laws with great respect. They organize the graveyard and burn paper offerings so that the souls of the deceased can live in the underworld” (Levin pg2). There are traditions of burning paper made houses, cars, money, etc. because people want to give the deceased things that the deceased might have wanted to be with or want in their afterlife to enjoy what they couldn’t when they were still alive.

## METHODS

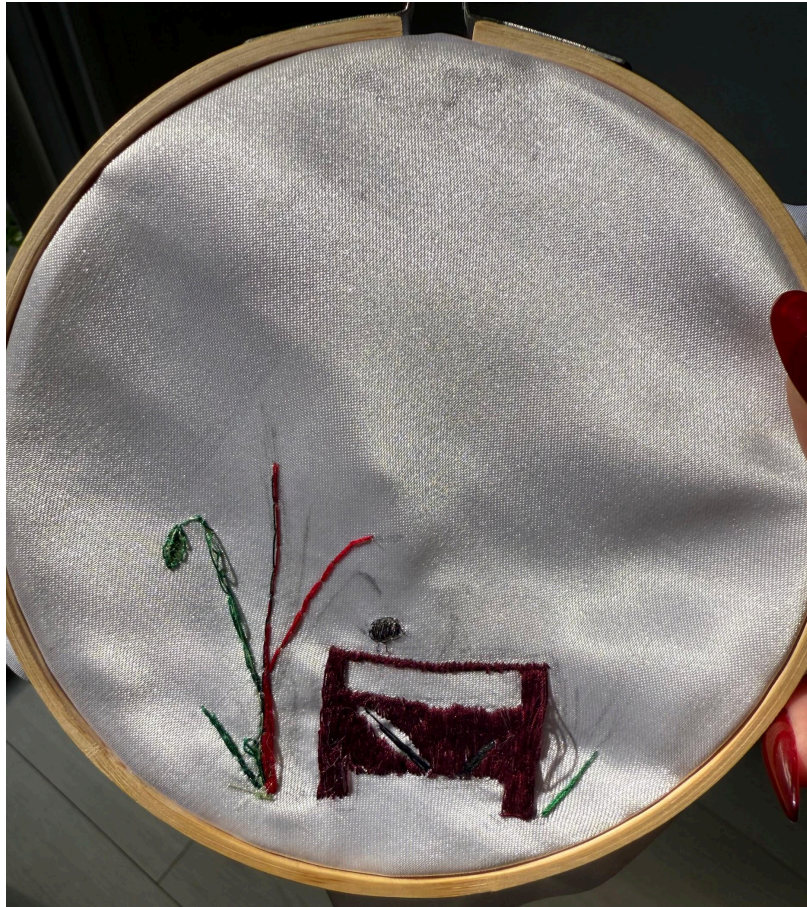
The choice of media comes from my desire to commemorate my grandfather and his contribution to my life. He taught me the important aspects about my own culture and lineage and his favorite traditional work has always been embroidery. Thus, I want to show my appreciation and love through the things that he always enjoyed. The other perspective incorporates the broader topic of wanting to connect with my own culture again, forging my own cultural identity, and portraying how it is possible for others to do so as well. Chinese embroidery possesses the power to have cultural impact and significance in one's journey to forging their connection with their culture and cultural identity.

The design of this capstone project involves a tremendous amount of research and testing in order to ensure that the message of the artwork is conveyed properly. The fabric that is going to be used as the base of the embroidery is going to be silk. Silk is often used in Chinese embroidery pieces, especially handkerchiefs. Traditionally, a handkerchief is viewed as a valued item that is meant to be personal and intimate for the person to bring as it holds importance and value to them. Throughout this time, my mentor is going to be able to give me the historical information that I would need to complete this project. He will also be going through the significance of each part of this project with me to show both cultural and personal connection.

In this photo, it showed the elements that I wish to incorporate into my design. There is the red mahogany sofa from my childhood that my grandfather and I shared the majority of our memories on. There are also flowers from one of my grandfather's favorite embroidery artwork and fan embroidery showing the gradient I used.



## DESIGN



This is the final edition of my capstone project. In this project, I incorporated my own hair as a personal symbol of my grievings for my grandfather and the connection that I feel for my culture. In Chinese culture, hair can be used as a way to use a part of my body to create that intimate thread that ties me closer to my culture, family, and identity. This piece is to show that even as things are growing around me and time is flowing constantly, there will always be a part of me anchored at the red mahogany sofa reliving the warmth and joy of my childhood and the memories that my grandfather and I shared. Although grieving is bittersweet, it is one of the only ways to hold onto the past and love as I continue to grow with the knowledge, connections, and experiences that I was fortunate enough to have.

## FINDINGS

Throughout this project, I have come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be Chinese American and the role that embroidery plays within it. Although this work began as a way to commemorate my grandfather, throughout this process it evolved into something more precious. I was able to embark on a journey into my heritage and memory and thread them that bind generations together.

Through the countless hours spent stitching, I developed a greater appreciation for the labor, discipline, and devotion that this artwork requires. I began to understand the patience, precision, and care that is required from the generations before me, especially when women in my culture mastered this craft as a necessity and form of expression. It is not a decorative technique for luxury items but also a language of care, intention, and memory.

Embroidery is an extremely unforgiving type of media. Every stitch had to be intentional and carefully considered as there isn't a way to pull the thread back through and cutting the thread early would cause the previous stitches to go to waste. The mistakes are difficult to conceal as this type of embroidery requires both sides to show the same pattern. This project has taught me to be fully immersed in the task at hand and be fully present. Over time, I began to see each stitch as not just a physical action, but a symbolic one that threaded fragments of my identity, family history, and relationships.

This experience deepened my understanding of why this handmade work is valued by my grandfather and my culture. This creative outlet came with a cultural tradition of peace and beauty that has been passed down through generations. I was able to recognize the privilege I have to explore my culture on my own terms in order to express myself and my cultural identity.

As the project progressed, I found myself at peace with the way that my life has evolved around me. The work became a space where I was able to find different pieces of myself and perspectives of the people before me and thread them together. This increased the connection I have with my culture and its ability to embed this practice into its traditions. Every stitch was intentionally piecing everything: memories, culture, and identity; together to create the embroidery.

As the final stage, I chose to burn the completed embroidery project as a symbolic ending. By burning the work, it was an offering that I was finally capable of making for my grandfather as a gesture of love and remembrance. Through this process, the embroidery was able to transcend from a tangible item to a spiritual artwork. Rather than feeling pity for ruining the artwork, it felt more like a continuation of the memories my grandfather and I had together and a representation of a rebirth of my current self with connections of my culture and identity.

This project allowed me to rediscover the power of traditional craftsmanship to forge a connection, the emotional depth of cultural and traditional practices, and the impact of memories and present conditions. This project was a way to bid farewell to my past self that was lost with where she stood in this world and a welcome to the knowledge, connections, and identity that she was able to obtain through this process.

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