

# SU EMBROIDERY

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Su embroidery is a beautiful symbol of Suzhou culture, which is like a brisk and graceful reflection upon the waters of the Yangtze River, or a wondrous flower from this land of good earth. For thousands of years, Su embroidery has not only accompanied people in the region south of the Yangtze River (known as “Jiangnan”) on items of daily use, but it has also been a bright pearl bringing together the customs of ordinary people with the charm of poets and artists.

## Sources of Su Embroidery

**W**hat is Su embroidery? Where did it come from? How was this tradition developed? These may be the questions readers would like to have been answered first.

Embroidery is called “ci xiu” in Chinese. Ci means to pierce or penetrate; Xiu is to make patterns and pictures with silk thread on silk fabric according to a design or drawing with a variety of stitches. Therefore, we may regard embroidery as an art of the needle and colorful threads. It is rich for decorative effect and artistic appeal.

### 1. Multiple Sources

Embroidery could be seen even at the primitive stages of Chinese culture. Primitive embroidery gradually developed from multiple sources in our ancestors’ search for beauty.

## (1) Bone Needles with Colorful Threads

The invention of needles came from early humans, need for warmth and beauty, and needles made it possible for colorful threads to go into any fabric. Approximately 18,000 years ago, our ancestors were no longer naked. They learned to make bone needles, with which they made leather clothes for warmth and beauty.



Unearthened bone needles



Unearthened bone needles

In the 1930s, the first bone needle was unearthened at Zhoukoudian of Fangshan County, Beijing. The eye of the needle was narrow and broken, the tip was sharp, and the entire needle was smooth and well-preserved. At the beginning of this century, many bone needles from 8,500 years ago were found in Inner Mongolia, most slightly bent, a few straight, all with eyes of the same size. In



Banpo Village in Xi'an, bone needles and bone shuttles from more than 6,000 years ago were also found. These needles represent the earliest needlework of our ancestors.

Bone needles played an important role in the emergence of the art of embroidery. Needles are to embroidery artists as brushes are to painters. Dragons and phoenixes are created with tiny needles pulling colorful threads. Without the invention of bone needles by our ancient ancestors, the following generations would not have been inspired to develop embroidery from their use of needles in sewing clothing.

## (2) Tattoos

Tattoos are another source of embroidery. These two kinds of art are culturally related, and the tools used for tattoos also gave rise to the art of embroidery.

Tattoos developed from body painting. During prehistoric times, our ancestors' earliest appreciation of beauty was deeply related to their primitive religions, and they had a particular affection for the color red. At first, hunters smeared blood on their bodies to show to their companions that they were victors. Gradually, the color red became a special symbol. Before hunters set out to hunt, they painted their bodies red and held a ceremony to wish for success. Once they caught their prey, everybody would color their bodies red and dance to celebrate. To paint the body red could also please the opposite sex, for only a good fighter would be regarded as a hero by women.



A pitcher with human facial patterns

After many long years, this habit of painting the body for prayer and attraction developed into a permanent way of keeping the colors and patterns on the body — through tattoos.

In prehistoric ages, on the wild lands of the Taihu Lake basin in Jiangnan, the natives made a living by fishing and hunting. They were often bitten by snakes. Thus the Wu-Yue people venerated the snake god and worshiped the dragon god. They cut their hair and tattooed their bodies with dragon-like shapes to ward off the water god.

Back then, it was a painful process to tattoo the body; the skin was pierced, and blood came out with each movement of the needle. Moreover, only one part of the body could be tattooed at a time, because after tattooing

one had to lie in bed for two to three days, the entire body swollen, until scars were formed. Only after recovery and the scars coming off could another part of the body be tattooed.

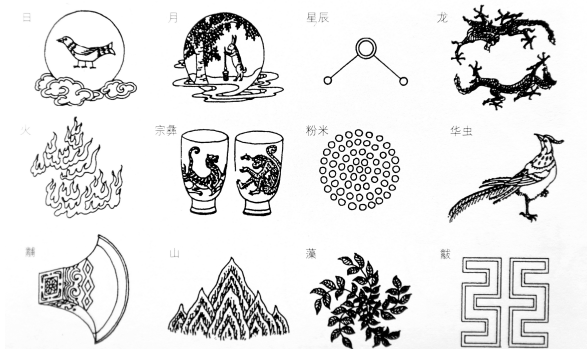
Therefore, as the story goes, after Taibo, the first ancestor of the State of Wu, passed away, his successor Zhongyong could not bear to see anyone else suffer from tattooing, and so he gathered his courtiers to discuss the issue. His granddaughter, sewing inside her chamber, overheard the discussion and fell deep into thought. She accidentally pieced her finger with a needle, and her sleeve was stained with blood. Then she had an idea. She tried to embroider the tattoo patterns on a garment. In order to make it more beautiful, she used threads of five different colors, and imitating the structure of her braid, she embroidered for seven days and seven nights. When it was completed, she presented the embroidered garment to her grandfather, who wore it. It was more beautiful than any tattooed body. Zhongyong selected a lucky date to put on the garment and announce to the public: From now on, you can make clothes like this, and there is no need to make tattoos. The embroidery that replaced tattoos was therefore called needlework.

### (3) Patterned Official Clothing

Approximately 4,000 years ago, China became a patriarchal clan society. The establishment of private ownership led to the beginning of the official clothing system, and primitive embroidery began to be brought

into royal rituals. The ancient history book *Shang Shu* records the idea that “when the clothing is regulated, the kingdom is governed”. The regulations for king’s clothing held that the upper part of the clothing must be black and lower part red. The representational embroidered patterns that were allowed, called the twelve heraldries, are as follows: sun, moon, star, mountain, dragon, pheasant, fire, wine container for worship, five-color ribbon, a white representation of the Chinese character for rice (米), a half-black and half-white pattern, a half-black and half-green pattern.

Colors were also strictly regulated. In *Matters of Drawing and Painting* it was stated: Painting is to mix colors and draw patterns on clothing. Green is for east, red for south, white for west, black for north; black represents the sky, yellow the earth. The sequence of colors is: white after green, black after red, yellow after



The twelve heraldries of royal clothing

black.

The regulated clothing system differentiated the classes of our ancestors. Thanks to the rulers' appreciation of beauty and elegance, colorful and patterned embroidered clothes appeared in ancient times. In 1975, a piece of an embroidered gown was unearthed from the Yubo tomb from the early Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1046-256 BCE) at Gaorujia village of Baoji. On the gown, we can see clearly traces of lockstitch embroidery with yellow silk thread on red fabric that demonstrates the beautiful style of the period. It indicates that when painting could not satisfy our ancestors' appreciation of beauty and need for the ritual, they would use colorful embroidery, the style of which was determined by the rulers' values



Early Tang Dynasty clothing from Dunhuang Cave 220

and aesthetic judgment. The patterned clothing system blended painting and embroidery and catalyzed the art of embroidery.

## 2. Historical Inheritance

What is Su embroidery (“Suxiu”)?

“Su embroidery” refers to the embroidery originating from Suzhou and its vicinity within Jiangsu Province. When our clever ancestors created written characters, they somehow associated embroidery with Jiangsu. The Chinese character for embroidery is xiu (绣), which contains the characters for silk (丝) and rice (禾), representing the close relationship between silkworms and rice paddies. The traditional character for su (蘇) contains the characters for fish (魚) and rice (禾), too. It is easy to imagine that this place was rich in natural resources and people were affluent and endowed with the conditions to develop embroidery. The seasonal flowers, fruit, insects, fishes, and birds all provided endless subject matters for Su embroidery; the rippling water, enshrouding mist, and the ever-changing weather and colors of nature cultivated the fine, soft, delicate, and exquisite characters of the girls in Jiangnan, who, in turn, transformed such inner qualities onto their embroidery, so that we can feel the wisdom and dexterity on their work. Such softness! Such exquisiteness! Such eternal beauty!



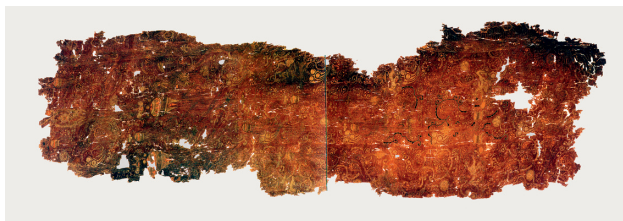
Silk-worm raising customs in the land of Wu

## (1) Conception

Su embroidery originates from the delta area of the south of the Yangtze River, and it is closely related to raising silkworms and making silk. The archeological evidence indicates that sericulture arose no later than the time of the Yellow River civilization. The Wuyue people began to raise silkworms as early as Neolithic Age. Many spinning and weaving tools were unearthed from the site of the ancient Hemudu cultural remains. On an ivory cup found there, a weaving pattern and a silkworm picture are carved. At the bottom of a Neolithic terrine unearthed from Meinian of Wu county of Jiangsu Province, a pair of silkworms is also carved. Silk ribbons and pieces were unearthed from the Qianshanyang site of Neolithic remains at Wuxing on the border between

Jiangsu Province and Zhejiang Province. Ample evidence indicates that raising silkworms and making silk began in the region south of the Yangtze River (known as “Jiangnan”) as early as 7,000 years ago.

We still have no idea when exactly embroidery appeared in Jiangsu Province, but from the embroidery relics unearthed, we know of something about the use of embroidery by Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) aristocrats. In 1982, some embroidered fragments were unearthed from the tomb of Madam Liu Xu of King Guanglin at Tianshan of Gaoyou, and much like the famous “longevity embroidery” unearthed from Mawangdui, they have clear lines that resemble floating clouds and flowing water, and birds’ heads are embroidered with a single braid stitch. In 1993, some local embroidery fragments were found in a group of Han Dynasty tombs at the Yi Bay of the East Sea. After the pieces were put together, a piece of Han Dynasty embroidery appeared: On a large piece of brown thin silk, floating clouds looking like ears of grain cover the entire background; on the embroidery are found a flying auspicious animal, a feathered human in search of the



An unearthened remnant of an embroidered quilt



elixir of eternal youth, a jumping deer, a phoenix, and a peacock as well as a golden turtle in the colorful clouds on the top. This piece is embroidered with a single braid stitch, and the stitches are tight and even, demonstrating great skills.

Towards the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE.), an envoy of the State of Jin was sent to the State of Wu. Liu Xiang of East Han Dynasty recorded this diplomatic mission in *On Gardens*: “The people of Wu accompanied them in painted boats, with 500 people on the left, and 500 people on the right, some wearing embroidered gowns and leopard fur coats, some wearing brocade robes and fox fur coats.” This tells us that the embroidery in Jiangnan was more sophisticated than people in other places expected.

During the Six Dynasties (222-589 CE), Emperor Liangwu of the Southern Dynasty advocated Buddhism and embroidery. In his court there were more than 500 embroidery artists. There are also records of embroidered brocade skirts and Buddhist dharma in the Qi (479-502 CE) and Liang (502-557 CE) Dynasties. Therefore, we know that embroidery was already well developed in Jiangnan at that time.

In the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), the embroidery in Jiangnan made great progress. Two lines of poetry sing the praises of the beautiful embroidery of Wu prefecture: “The entire country copies their patterns... To dye the flowers with their water colors.” Furthermore, with Buddhism flourishing in China, Buddhist sutras



A remnant of a piece of embroidery

and images became the main content of embroidery. The subject matter was enriched and the skills improved.

## (2) Maturity

In the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), Su Embroidery matured. Influenced by the academic painting style, to embroider both pictures and calligraphic images became popular. Especially after the capital of China moved to Jiangnan, pure artistic embroidery (as opposed to embroidery on clothing or objects of everyday use) appeared as a result of the cultural development there. It became a common practice for professional painters to provide embroiderers with paintings to work on, and so painting and embroidery were combined as an art form. All kinds of skills were required to make embroidery as vivid as paintings, which enhanced the stitching skills and color techniques. At that time, even street names were associated with embroidery including: Embroidery Lane, Embroidered Brocade Street, Embroidery Workshop Street, Embroidery Alley, etc., indicating that painters and embroiderers lived in there.

In this period of time, there were mainly two trends in embroidery: To embroider artistic pieces (Buddhist images and famous artists' paintings and calligraphy), and to embroider clothes or other practical items. These two developed side by side and influenced each other. The embroidery on painting-like artistic pieces was delicate and life-like. The practical embroidery was decorative and also demonstrated a high level of technique. New



*Plum, Bamboo and Parrot*

stitches came out one after another, with stronger and stronger expressive power; this was mainly found on Buddhist embroidery such as the embroidered sutra found on a piece of silk unearthed in 1961 in Yunyan Temple of Huqiu. The stitches are close and even. Although it has been a thousand years old, the flowers and patterns are still bright and clear, simple and tasteful.

An embroidered sutra from the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 CE) unearthed from Ruiguang Tower used 3-thread halo coloring and was extraordinarily exquisite. The deep red gauze with embroidered peonies on a long and rectangular bag unearthed from Zhouyu Temple of Jintan Maolu indicates the working process: First, the flower pattern was pasted on; then, the petals



Unearthed silk sutra wrap



Unearthed saddlebag with peony patterns

and stems were embroidered with braid stitches.

Although the brilliance of these valuable relics has faded, they are evidence of the Jiangsu embroidery tradition. They are exquisite and full of creative inspiration. They served as the foundation for the later development of embroidery.

In the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368 CE), embroidery bureaus and offices were found all over China. The artistic level of artistic pieces of embroidery as well as embroidered items of practical use was greatly enhanced. Thanks to Kublai Khan's advocacy of Buddhism, the

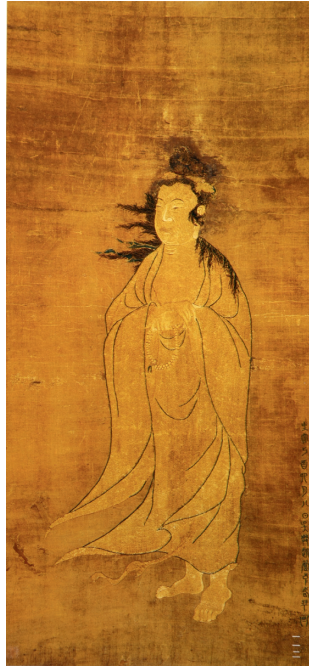
embroidered works were infused with an inspiring Buddhist spirit. One of the pieces collected by the Nanjing Museum and embroidered by Guan Zhongji, the wife of the famous painter Zhao Zi'ang, illustrates certain characteristics of Song Dynasty embroidery – it had both silk thread and hair, which produced dynamic and vigorous as well as serene effects.

In the Ming (1368-1644 CE) and Qing (1644-1912 CE) Dynasties, a social phenomenon appeared in Suzhou: Every household was either raising silkworms or making embroidery. Su embroidery became a family business conducted by women. Commercial embroidery there was so highly developed that Suzhou was regarded as the embroidery capital, and their products were exported to overseas markets. New techniques emerged, including sprinkle thread, embedded golden thread, combined threads, hair thread, and woolen floss embroidery. The unique style of Su embroidery was thus formed and became well known for its exquisiteness, meticulousness, elegance, and purity. Su embroidery, as one of the exemplars of quintessential Suzhou culture, not only had a style of its own that was known domestically, but it was also favored internationally. It was not uncommon that a foreigner would gladly pay thousands of gold coins to purchase a piece.

Meanwhile, the Suzhou Embroidery Bureau was restored in the Ming Dynasty, which helped bring the art of Su embroidery to an even more mature stage. In the mid-Ming Dynasty in the city of Wuxi, the young

widow Madam Yu, the wife of You Zhongji, embroidered to support her son and created a new way to embroider with piled yarns. Her embroideries were such marvelous creations that the locals all imitated her style, and she became the first recorded embroidery artist in the county's chronicles.

During the Jiajing period (1521- 1567) of the Ming Dynasty, Shanghai, which borders Suzhou, saw the rise of Gu embroidery, which became famous throughout the country. Represented by the works of Han Ximeng, the wife of the grandson of the great scholar Gu Mingshi, the embroidery topped Jiangnan with its superior excellence. Gu embroidery inherited the true spirit of Song Dynasty painting and embroidery, took pride in imitating the masterpieces of the old, and blended painting and embroidery as one. Its vivid and refined artistry matched the taste of the people at that time and represented the fashion. It was the most expensive name brand of the day, and each scholar would



*Embroidered Goddess of Mercy*



Apricot Village





Two Phoenixes

pride himself on possessing a piece from Luxiangyuan, the best workshop of Gu embroidery.

Gu embroidery's artistry influenced the entire Jiangnan region. Many embroidery workshops named themselves "Gu embroidery," and as late as the 1950s there were still quite a few Gu embroidery workshops in



*Rich and Noble*



Baby brought by a Qilin, a Qing Dynasty woodblock print



*A Beauty and a Young Master, a Qing Dynasty New Year woodblock print*



Great Filial Piety



Service for Mother



The Qing Dynasty clothing material

Suzhou. However, it has to be said that Gu embroidery is different from Su embroidery in style. Moreover, after the Jiajing period of the Qing Dynasty, Gu embroidery gradually fell into decay. It cannot compare with Su embroidery, which is still flourishing and developing now.

It is worth mentioning that during Jiajing period an important event happened in the arts circle of Jiangnan: Kun opera, which originated in Kunshan and was improved by Wei Liangfu, became so popular that it topped all other opera styles, and its elaborate costumes demanded embroidery and drove the industry enormously.

Also in this period of time, with the development and prosperity of Su embroidery, worship of Madam Horsehead, the silkworm god, became very popular. Meanwhile, Ning and Yang embroidery also developed, and some professional production areas appeared and created a large number of excellent embroidered works.

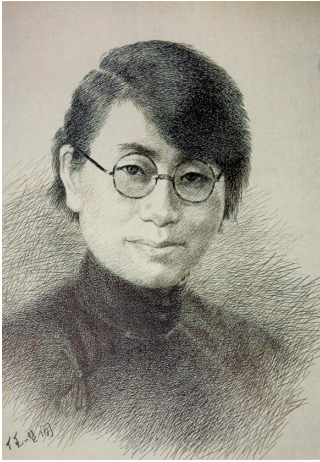
### (3) Glorious Zenith

From the end of Qing Dynasty in 1912 to the 1950s, many excellent embroidery artists appeared in Jiangnan. Shen Shou from Suzhou, Li Peifu and Hua Ji from Wuxi, and Yang Shouyu from Changzhou all enjoyed the fame of the “divine needle”. They were talented women who embraced modernity while continuing the tradition, studied the art of embroidery and advocated new ideas in realizing their dreams. They won international fame and lead the development of embroidery. They were also



Wujiang Shengze Temple of Silkworm God

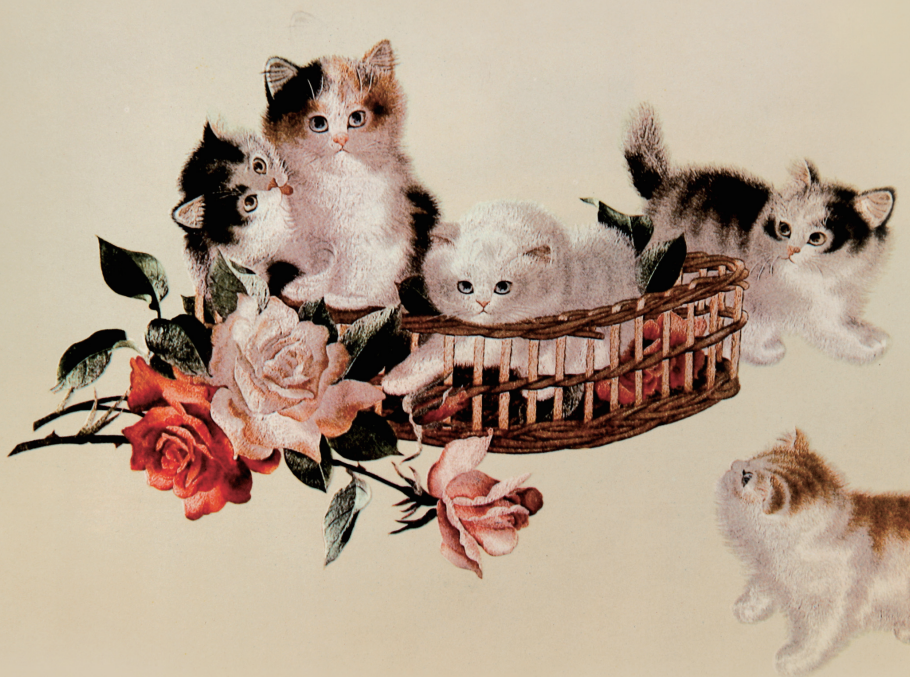




Yang Shouyun by Ren Huixian with motley stitches



Shen Shou's portrait embroidery of Queen Elena





*Cats*



*Yangtze River Bridge of Nanjing*



全国各族人民的大团结万岁！

enthusiastic about teaching embroidery and demonstrated their talent in education, too. Some even wrote books and established new theories, turning a new page in the history of the art of Chinese embroidery.

In 1910, the Qing Dynasty government hosted the China Expo, in which Shen Shou's embroidery Portrait of Queen Elena of Italy won first prize. The works of Li Peifu and Hua Ji also won gold medals. Scores of embroidered pieces from Changzhou and Wuxi won prizes. In 1909, the works of Li Peifu and others also had won awards in the International Expos held in Brussels, Belgium and Turin, Italy. The modernized Su embroidery then became internationally famous and turned over a new leaf in its long history.

After the Republic of China was founded in 1912, although the royal demand for embroidery stopped, the international markets developed, promoting the export of embroidery products. In the early 1920's, Su embroidery prospered. Then the Japanese invaded China, causing Su embroidery to fall into decay, and the market shrank.

After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the government protected and promoted national handicrafts, and Su embroidery developed at an unprecedented speed. Cooperative business operations organized embroiderers to study the art and techniques of Su embroidery, and thus saved, inherited, and carried forward this tradition. Practitioners frequently updated skills, and led Su embroidery to its glorious zenith. The skills that were perfected included the following: double-

sided embroidery, uneven and cross-stitches, double-sided two-color embroidery, and double-sided tri-color embroidery. Masterpieces were made one after another, and this art that had once been at the brink of extinction came back to life again. Based on the old foundation of stippling and close stitches, variegated color embroidery developed. Traditional embroidery as a subsidiary decoration expanded in variety and some pieces became independent decorative artifacts. This old handcraft made breakthroughs in modern times, and some areas of the countryside once again experienced prosperity in which “every house was an embroidery workshop and everyone was embroidering”. In addition, machine embroidery saved womanpower and lowered costs. In less than 30 years, Su embroidery reached its artistic peak.

#### (4) Transition

After China’s economic reform and opening up began in 1978, the embroidery industry was negatively affected by the new market economy. In those modern times of urbanization, traditional Su embroidery went through a period of transition and experienced ordeals, but was finally revived with new roles for embroiderers and embroidery; embroidered works mostly became high-end gifts and souvenirs or objects for collection, with many sold overseas, and some embroiderers became distributors themselves or ran their own embroidery stores. The most noteworthy phenomenon was the rise of the vigorous embroidery industry group represented by Zhenhu in

永樂宮壁畫三壁

丙寅年集滋慈貞老人裝  
時年七十有一



Yongle Palace Mural



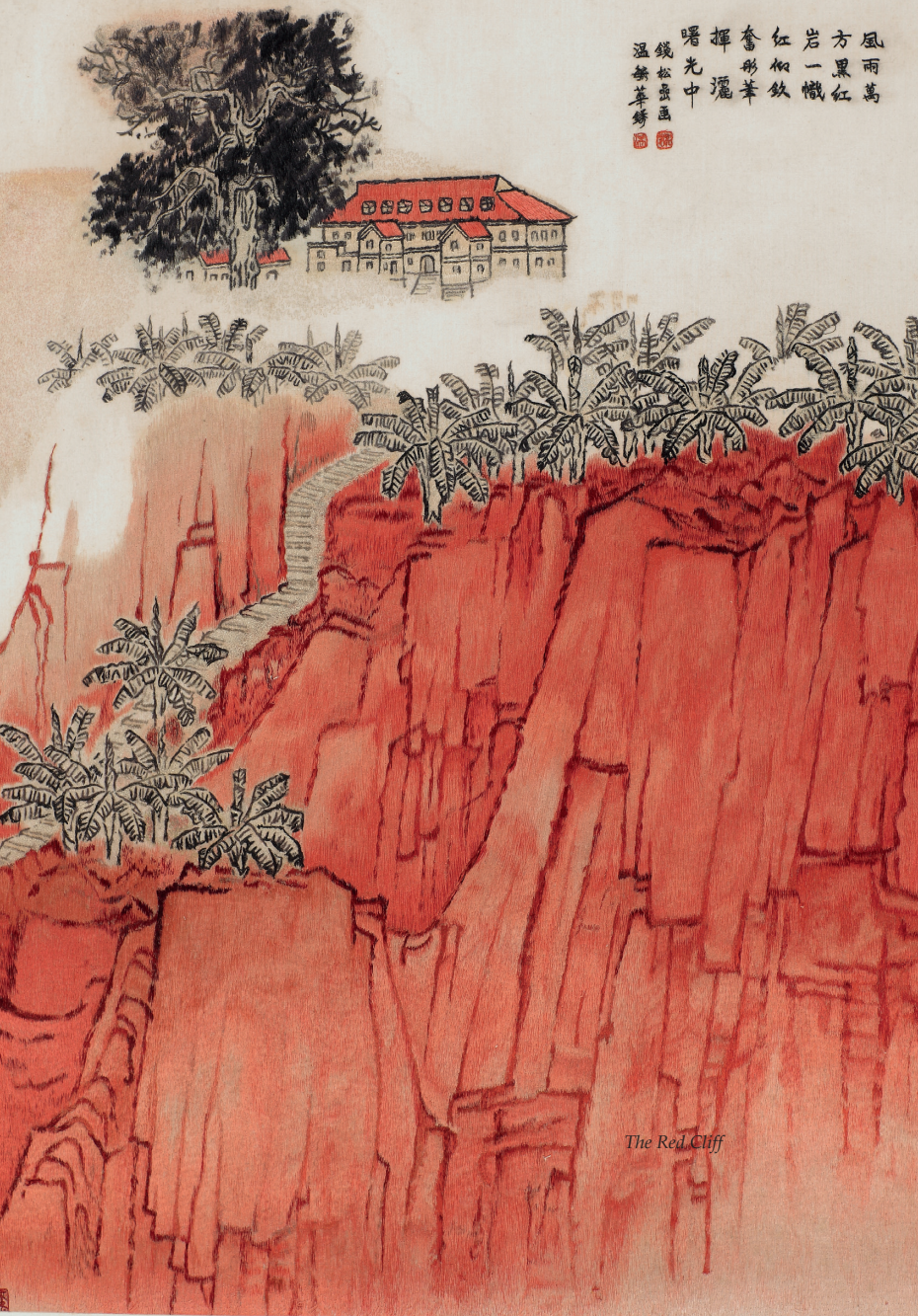


*Prince Nezha's Triumph Against the Dragon King*

風雨萬  
方果紅  
岩一幟  
紅似欽  
奮形羊  
揮灑  
曙光中

錢松畫

溫英筆



The Red Cliff



Two Beauties on a double-sided embroidery in different colors (one side)



Two Beauties on a double-sided embroidery in different colors (the other side)

Suzhou.

In the late 1980s, with the deepening of the reform and opening up, the embroiderers of Zhenhu seized a historical opportunity by producing embroidery souvenirs and selling their products themselves. With huge profits, they expanded their business, which gradually transforms from being a sideline industry to the main industry.

In the mid and late 1990s, after accumulated sufficient experience, the embroiderers in the countryside also experienced huge changes. Some of them began to seek skills to give them higher expressive power in their work. They sought out masters and invited experts to teach them. They further studied painting and went abroad to investigate and broaden their horizons. In doing so, they acquired new knowledge and skills and transformed themselves from craftswomen to true artists. At the same time, they created name brands and brought their embroidery to a higher level. This new generation of embroiderers with modern ideas has shown its outstanding talent, and is of epoch-making significance.

At present, Su embroidery faces the historic challenge of how to blend into this modern life. New aesthetics and new tastes constantly demand that embroiderers think outside of the box, embrace all kinds of original ideas, create modern art works as well as practical pieces, and reach a new height in transfiguring Su embroidery into a modern art form.



Ye embroidery on a fashion show clothing