

The Historical Mark of Shu Brocade: From Ancient Shu Tales to Cultural Inheritance

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Abstract. In the long history of Chinese silk, Shu Brocade, with its unique artistic charm and profound cultural heritage, has become a dazzling gem in China's silk culture. This paper conducts an in-depth study of Shu Brocade, a significant component of China's silk culture, examining its historical background, tales, technological development, and the impact of cultural exchanges. Through an analysis of the origins, symbolic meanings of tales, and iconic patterns of Shu Brocade, such as the "Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image" and the "Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style", the paper reveals the central role Shu Brocade plays in artistic and cultural heritage. The findings indicate that Shu Brocade not only embodies ancient craftsmanship but also serves as a source of modern cultural innovation. The paper emphasizes the importance of protecting and innovating traditional Shu Brocade to ensure its continued vitality in contemporary society and its evolving role in international cultural exchanges.

Keywords: Shu Brocade, Silk, History, Culture.

1. Introduction

In the long history of Chinese silk, Shu Brocade, with its unique artistic charm and profound cultural heritage, has become a dazzling gem in China's silk culture. Originating from the ancient Shu civilization, this silk weaving technique not only carries rich historical information and exquisite craftsmanship but also served as an important bridge for cultural exchanges between ancient China and the outside world [1]. Over time, the production techniques and pattern designs of Shu Brocade have continuously evolved throughout history, becoming a significant lens through which to study the development of ancient Chinese society, economy, culture, and craftsmanship [2].

This study reveals the outstanding position of Shu brocade in art and culture. These patterns not only demonstrate the superb skills of ancient craftsmen but also reflect the cultural taste and aesthetic pursuits of society at that time. The research focuses not only on the material culture of Shu brocade but also on its spiritual and cultural connotations, exploring how it serves as a cultural symbol, conveying the emotions, beliefs, and social values of ancient people.

In the context of globalization, the study of Shu brocade has historical as well as practical significance. It can help us better understand and protect this intangible cultural heritage and inspire modern design, promoting the innovative development of traditional crafts. This research aims to contribute to the inheritance and development of Shu brocade, allowing this ancient silk art to regain new vitality in the new era, and further look forward to future studies continuing to explore the modern application of Shu brocade and its new role in international cultural exchanges, thus continuing its role as a cultural link between the past and the future.

2. The Historical Background of Shu Brocade

2.1. The Origin of Shu Brocade

China is recognized as the birthplace of silk, with archaeological evidence indicating that the technology of sericulture and silk weaving was invented approximately 7,000 years ago, during the middle to late Neolithic period [3]. During the Western Zhou period, extensive mulberry gardens and fields had been established for sericulture. The Zhou dynasty even implemented standardized management over textile production, with positions such as "Dian Fugong," "Dian Si," "Dian Xi,"

and "Ran Ren" under the auspices of "Tian Guan."; meanwhile, the "Di Guan" oversaw roles like "Zhang Ge" and "Zhang Rancao," managing dyes, textile raw materials, and related affairs of garment manufacturing [3]. It was also during this period that "brocade" emerged as a precious type of silk fabric, this complex organization of the double plain weave revealed a vibrant and colorful pattern, marking the birth of this exquisite silk variety.

2.2. The Tales of Shu Brocade

2.2.1. Lei Zu

The origins of Shu brocade are intertwined with several tales, among which Lei Zu, the god of Sericulture-Qingyi and the goddess of sericulture-Matouniang play significant roles.

Lei Zu, who is a legendary figure and is said to be the wife of Huangdi (also named Yellow Emperor, one of legendary ancestors of the Chinese nation) in ancient Chinese mythology. According to the *Latter Records of Lu History V*, it is recorded: "Lei Zu was respected as the goddess of sericulture for her initiation of silkworm culture." In the early Yuan dynasty, Jin Lvxiang's *Compendium of Chronicles* documented: "Lei Zu as the daughter of Xiling, is revered as the "Goddess of Sericulture" for teaching people to raise silkworms, produce silk cocoons, and make clothes [4,5]." This clearly indicates that the invention of sericulture is attributed to Lei Zu from the Sichuan region. The tales of Lei Zu epitomizes the inception of Chinese silk culture, particularly in the Central Plains region. Her narrative not only signifies the dissemination of sericulture techniques but also symbolizes the esteemed position of silk culture in ancient Chinese society. Although the tales of Lei Zu are not directly correlated with the origins of Shu brocade, as the emblem of the sericulture tradition, she exerts an indirect influence on the development of Shu brocade.

2.2.2. Qingyi-Can Cong

The tale of Qingyi, known as Can Cong, is unique to the region of Shu. According to the records in Volume 888 of "*Selection of Articles. Ode to Shu's Capita*" that Can Cong, Bo Guan and Yu Fu respectively became immortals after hundreds of years on the earth. So did their people [6]. The character for the state of Shu" resembles a silkworm spinning its cocoon. As interpreted in the '*Study of Composition of Characters* ', the term "Shu" is defined as a "silkworm among the sunflowers." Both the '*Jade Study*' and '*Explanation of Writing*' also mention that "Shu" refers to a "silkworm among the mulberries" [7]. Hence, it can be deduced that the leader of Shu, known as "Can Cong", was named so due to the abundance of mulberry trees in the region and the local practice of feeding silkworms with mulberry leaves. In the "*Records of Rongxian County*" compiled by the renowned Qing dynasty Sinologist Duan Yucai, it is written: "Silkworms thrive in Shu, hence Shu is called Can Cong, and Shu is also a silkworm itself [8]." The leader Can Cong led the people of Shu in sericulture and mulberry cultivation, and thus was revered as the "Qingyi." He symbolizes the origin and development of Shu brocade and the veneration of the sericulture industry by the people of Shu.

2.2.3. Matouniang

Matouniang is one of the silk deities in ancient Chinese mythology, often depicted as a goddess with the head of a horse and the body of a woman. Whenever the silkworms mature, the story of Matouniang becomes widely circulated in the Shu region. The tale of Matouniang first appears in the Jin Dynasty text "*Records of Deities*" Volume 14, which tells of a woman who jokingly promised to marry her family's horse if it could bring her father back from a distant expedition. The horse accomplished this feat, but the father, misunderstanding the horse's intentions, shot and killed the animal. Subsequently, the woman was carried away by the horse's skin, and both were transformed into silkworm cocoons hanging from a tree, which was a mulberry tree [9]. This story symbolizes the origin of Shu brocade, and nowadays, there are still temples in Sichuan that commemorate Matouniang. The Qing Dynasty text "*Notes of Traveling in Sichuan*" records: "On the thirtieth of March, as the dawn just began to break, I passed through the silk market and heard the sound of drums and music approaching from afar. The locals informed me that this was a ceremony in honor of

Matouniang [10]." She is the patron deity of sericulture, protecting the silkworm cocoons from disease and ensuring a bountiful harvest for the silk farmers.

In the long history of Shu brocade, the stories of silkworm and mulberry mythological figures have been passed down from generation to generation, becoming an indispensable part of cultural heritage. The wisdom of Lei Zu, the leadership of Can Cong, and the sacrifice of Matouniang have together woven a rich cultural tapestry of Shu brocade. These tales not only provide a deeper understanding of the origins of Shu brocade but also reflect the profound emotional connection the ancient people of Shu had with nature and sericulture. To this day, these stories are still commemorated and celebrated in the temples of the Sichuan region, serving as a cultural link between the past and the present, allowing the tradition of Shu brocade to continue.

2.3. The Development of Shu Brocade

Since the Western Zhou period in China, there has been a tradition of brocade weaving, but there is a lack of direct documentary evidence regarding the emergence of "Shu brocade" in Sichuan. However, Indian texts such as the *Arthashastra* record that Chinese silk was exported to India via Myanmar as early as the 4th century BCE [11]. Chengdu, situated at a strategic point on the Southern Silk Road to Myanmar, saw its folk silk weaving industry rapidly develop under the stimulus of foreign trade. During the Western Han Dynasty, Yang Xiong a local from Chengdu, used a plenty of ornate vocabulary and rhetorical techniques to depict the production and uses of Shu brocade in "*Prose to Shu's Capital*" [6].

By the Three Kingdoms period, the output of Shu brocade had become substantial, and Zhuge Liang established the position of "Jin Guan (Silk Official)" to manage production and disseminate the skills of Shu brocade to ethnic minorities, with names like Zhuge Dong Brocade, Wuhou Brocade, and Zhuge Brocade still circulating in Yunnan and Guizhou to this day. According to the "*Historical Records of Huayang*," the southeast corner of Chengdu has been a prolific region for Shu brocade since ancient times, where the "Jin Guan" managed its production, hence the name "Jin Guan Cheng (City of Silk Officials) [12]." A river flowed through this area, later known as the "Jin Jiang (Brocade River)." The "Jin Jiang Tower" stood in Jin Guan Cheng, and weavers lived in a place called "Jin Li." Chengdu became widely renowned as the "Silk Market."

By the time of the Western Jin Dynasty, Zuo Si, in his famous "*Prose to Shu's Capital*," wrote, "Within a radius of a hundred miles, every household is engaged in weaving, and the brocade they produce is as beautiful as the ripples on the river [6]." This vividly describes the vast scale and superb craftsmanship of the Shu brocade manufacturing industry in Chengdu at the time, indicating that Shu brocade had reached a significant historical stage of development.

3. The Iconic Works of Shu Brocade

In the rich artistic treasury of Shu brocade, two works have become the focus of research due to their outstanding artistic value and profound cultural impact. The first is the "Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image," which not only showcases the exquisite craftsmanship of Shu brocade but also vividly reflects the exchange and integration of different cultures. Secondly, the "Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style" has become an important milestone in the history of Shu brocade art development due to its innovation and popularity during the Tang Dynasty. Its unique pattern design and technical innovation fully demonstrate the prosperity of Shu brocade art. This paper will delve into these two cases to explore their significant positions in the history of Shu brocade development and their cultural significance.

3.1. The Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image

As illustrated in Figure 1, *The Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image* is an exquisite silk artwork, measuring 250 centimeters in length and 130 centimeters in width [2]. This brocade is renowned for its intricate craftsmanship and rich cultural connotations. It features 20 interlocking

roundels arranged vertically and horizontally, each centered around a Bodhi tree and depicting four knights adorned with crowns embellished with sun and moon symbols, riding winged celestial horses. The horse legs are decorated with the Chinese characters "Ji" and "Shan," and the spaces where the roundels intersect are filled with cross-shaped Tang grass patterns, known in Greek as "Acanthus cross patterns [13]."



Fig. 1 The Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image [14]

The origin of this brocade is quite legendary. It is speculated to be the result of cultural exchange between Persia and the Han Dynasty. This inference is drawn from the similarity between the four knights in the roundels and the image of King Shapur II of the Sassanian Empire riding and shooting lions on Persian silverware, as well as the sun and moon crowns worn by King Khosrow II and the sun and moon patterns on the ceremonial robes of the Sui Emperor Yang. During the Sui Dynasty, the finest silk products in China were mostly produced in Chengdu, suggesting that the Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image may well be a Sui Dynasty Shu brocade. In 607 AD, Prince Shotoku of Japan sent envoys to Chang'an, who brought this brocade back to Japan and used it as an imperial flag [13].

Additionally, fragments of the heavenly king hunting brocade unearthed from Tomb No. 77 in the Astana North District of Turpan, Xinjiang, confirm that this type of weft brocade was still being produced during the Tang Dynasty. After the King of Gaochang, Qu Bo'er, met with Emperor Yang of Sui in 609 AD, he may have brought back a similar brocade with interlocking beads and cross-shaped Tang grass patterns, which features floral trees and deer patterns within the beads. The fragments of this brocade are now preserved in the Shosoin Treasury in Nara, Japan [3].

This brocade is not only a crystallization of art and craftsmanship but also a product of the intersection of religion and mythology. The images of the Four Heavenly Kings and elements like the Bodhi tree reflect the religious symbolism of Buddhism and Taoism, demonstrating the power of faith in artistic creation. As a diplomatic gift, it witnessed political interactions and cultural exchanges between the Sui Dynasty and Japan, becoming a symbol of friendship and respect between the two nations.

The discovery of the Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image provides historians and archaeologists with valuable materials for studying ancient social culture, religious beliefs, artistic styles, and technological techniques. It not only allows us to glimpse the complexity of ancient society but also highlights the cultural confidence and national identity of the Shu region. The preservation and transmission of this brocade are a tribute to ancient craftsmanship and a cherishing of national cultural heritage. Its cultural significance transcends time and space, becoming a cultural link connecting the past with the present.

3.2. Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style

"Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style" refers to a specific type of design from the Tang Dynasty, characterized by its symmetrical, rounded, and full forms, with motifs often featuring animals and flowers [1]. This style was a new form of pattern that combined the cultural characteristics of the time with the aesthetic preferences of the general public. In the tenth volume of *Records of Famous Painting*, the renowned Tang Dynasty art theorist Zhang Yanyuan recorded: "Dou Shilun, courtesy

name Xiyan, ... served as a Record Keeper for the Prime Minister and was ennobled as the Duke of Lingyang. ... He created brocade with exquisite patterns, vibrant and unique in design, which the people of Shu still refer to as the 'Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style' [15]." From this record, it is evident that the brocade created by Dou Shilun featured luxurious, full patterns and vivid colors. However, it was not until the China National Silk Museum restored the "Lion and Treasure Flower Pattern Brocade" which is shown in Figure 2 that tangible evidence of the " Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style " became available for the first time. This type of patterned brocade was typically a high-end product collected by the Tang Dynasty's imperial court [16]. The designs often included motifs such as auspicious brocade, paired pheasants, rams in combat, soaring phoenixes, and roaming Qilin. These patterns were primarily symmetrical in composition, presenting a sense of harmony and balance, evoking a feeling of peace and beauty in the viewer. The " Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style " is not merely a decorative design but also carries profound cultural significance. It incorporates diverse cultural elements, reflecting the openness and inclusiveness of Tang society. Its rounded, symmetrical design symbolizes harmony and good fortune, embodying the people's pursuit of a prosperous and beautiful life.



Fig. 2 Lion and treasure flower pattern brocade [16]



Fig. 3 Bead on bird brocade [17]

As illustrated in Figure 3, the paired animal images in the " Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style," such as paired birds and beasts, convey blessings of double happiness and a harmonious life [3]. The rich symbolism of these patterns stems from the multicultural integration of the Tang Dynasty. It not only inherits traditional Chinese artistic styles but also absorbs the essence of decorative arts from Central and West Asia. This inclusive cultural background has made the " Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style " a cultural symbol that carries profound meaning. Additionally, the design, with its rounded and symmetrical shapes, reflects the Chinese cultural aspiration for reunion and perfection [3]. These patterns not only showcase the prosperity of the Tang Dynasty and the happiness of its people but also express wishes for peace and long-lasting prosperity for the nation.

In conclusion, the " Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style," as an artistic form, holds significant cultural value through its auspicious connotations and aspirations for a better life, while also maintaining a unique position within the cultural integration of the Tang Dynasty.

4. Conclusion

This study delves into the historical background, tales, evolution, and the significant role of Shu Brocade in cultural exchanges. By analyzing the origins, tales, and technological development of Shu Brocade, this paper reveals that it is not only a quintessential example of ancient Chinese silk weaving techniques but also a vivid embodiment of cultural integration and innovation. The findings show that the production techniques and pattern designs of Shu Brocade not only demonstrate the exceptional craftsmanship of ancient artisans but also reflect the cultural taste and aesthetic pursuits of the time. Iconic works such as the "Shu Brocade with Four Heavenly Kings Hunting Image" and the "Shu Brocade of Duke Lingyang Style" hold great artistic significance while also playing a vital role in social, cultural, and economic development.

The significance of this study lies in its emphasis on Shu Brocade as an indispensable part of traditional Chinese culture, underscoring its role in preserving and promoting China's rich cultural heritage. Furthermore, through an in-depth analysis of the history and culture of Shu Brocade, this research provides a wealth of inspiration for modern design, promoting the fusion of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary aesthetics. It offers theoretical support and practical guidance for the innovative development of Shu Brocade.

Future research could explore the application and development of Shu Brocade in contemporary society, investigating how its traditional techniques can be integrated with modern technology to create new products that cater to modern lifestyles. Additionally, further studies could examine the role of Shu Brocade in international cultural exchanges, and how it can enhance China's cultural influence globally. Further archaeological discoveries and technological restorations will also provide new perspectives and materials for the study of Shu Brocade.

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