

Reviving the Aesthetics of Manchu Royal Embroidery: Symbolic Motifs and Their Applications in Contemporary Products

Hanisa Hassan *

Sun Zengyu **

Yang Yueming ***

hanisa@umk.edu.my* (Corresponding Author), c20e0082f@siswa.umk.edu.my** &
c20e0079f@siswa.umk.edu.my***

Abstract

This study explores the historical and cultural significance of Royal Embroidery of Manchu, which flourished during the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), particularly under the reign of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722), a period marked by peace and cultural consolidation. Originating from the Manchu people of Ulla in Northeast China, the embroidery was a meticulously crafted the court art form, symbolising hierarchical rank, authority, and social order. The designs embedded within these textiles reflected a codified visual language unique to the Manchu imperial court. However, efforts to preserve and interpret this heritage are facing challenges due to generational misunderstandings and historical misrepresentations by the public. This research aims to clarify the original meanings and hierarchical structure of Manchu embroidery, with the broader objective of informing its integration into contemporary Chinese fashion. Using a descriptive method, the study triangulates data from observations, visual archives, and museum collections. Semiotic theory is applied to decode the symbolic meanings of the motifs, while structuralist theory, particularly Lévi-Strauss's and Binary Opposition are used to analyse the underlying systems and meaning that associate specific motifs with social rank. The findings offer valuable insights for both academic discourse and practical motifs application in fashion design, contributing to the preservation and revitalisation of Manchu textile heritage in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Manchu Royal Embroidery, Qing dynasty, sustainable design

Submitted: 26 Ogos 2024

Revised: 26 April 2026

Published: 30 September 2025

* Assoc Prof, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage , University Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan Malaysia

** Postgraduate Student, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage , University Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok Kelantan Malaysia

*** Postgraduate Student, Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, University Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan Malaysia



Menghidupkan Semula Estetika Sulaman Diraja Manchu: Motif Simbolik dan Aplikasinya dalam Produk Kontemporari

Hanisa Hassan *

Sun Zengyu **

Yang Yueming ***

*hanisa@umk.edu.my** (Penulis Koresponden), *c20e0082f@siswa.umk.edu.my*** & *c20e0079f@siswa.umk.edu.my****

Abstrak

Kajian ini meneroka kepentingan sejarah dan budaya Sulaman Diraja Manchu yang berkembang semasa Dinasti Qing (1636–1912), terutamanya di bawah pemerintahan Maharaja Kangxi (1661–1722), iaitu satu era yang dikenali dengan kestabilan dan pengukuhan budaya. Sulaman ini berasal dari masyarakat Manchu di Ulla, Timur Laut China merupakan hasil seni istana yang dihasilkan dengan teliti, berfungsi sebagai lambang hierarki, kuasa, dan status sosial. Corak-corak yang dihasilkan pada sulaman ini mencerminkan sebuah bahasa visual yang tersusun dan unik khusus untuk golongan bangsawan di Manchu. Namun, usaha pemeliharaan dan pentafsiran motif warisan ini menghadapi cabaran akibat kurangnya kefahaman generasi masa kini serta ketidak-tepatan dalam mentafsir maklumat sejarah yang berkaitan. Kajian ini bertujuan menjelaskan makna asal serta struktur hierarki dalam sulaman Manchu, dengan objektif untuk menyokong pengaplikasian sulaman Manchu ke dalam fesyen kontemporari di China. Melalui metodologi deskriptif, kajian ini menggunakan teknik analisis data triangulasi dengan menggabungkan data daripada pemerhatian, arkib, dokumentasi visual dan koleksi muzium. Teori semiotik digunakan untuk mentafsir makna simbolik motif-motif sulaman Manchu manakala teori strukturalisme, terutamanya kerangka Lévi-Strauss dan *Binary Opposition* digunakan untuk menganalisis sistem pengkelasan motif yang menghubungkan motif tertentu dengan status sosial. Dapatan kajian ini menawarkan cadangan praktikal untuk mengaplikasikan motif tradisional dari sulaman dinasti Mancu dalam produk kontemporari. Ia sekaligus menyumbang kepada usaha pemuliharaan dan menghidupkan semula warisan tekstil Manchu dalam konteks kontemporari.

Kata kunci: Estetik, Manchu, Sulaman Diraja, Dinasti Qing, reka bentuk Lestari

Dihantar: 26 August 2024

Disemak: 26 April 2026

Diterbit: 30 September 2025

* Prof. Madya, Fakulti Teknologi Kreatif dan Warisan, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok, Kelantan, Malaysia

** Pelajar Pascasiswazah, Fakulti Teknologi Kreatif dan Warisan, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok Kelantan, Malaysia

*** Pelajar Pascasiswazah, Fakulti Teknologi Kreatif dan Warisan, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, 16300 Bachok Kelantan Malaysia



1.0 INTRODUCTION

Royal Embroidery of Manchu (REM) traces its origins to ancient societies dating back over 7,000 years. The ancestors of the Manchu people, whose livelihoods revolved around fishing and hunting, held deep reverence for animals, often depicting them as totems carved into wood. These totems, representing familial or clan identities, were rich in ancestral significance. With the advent of textile production, such totemic symbols evolved into embroidered motifs, embedding cultural values into fabric. Thus, Manchu embroidery not only reflects aesthetic practices but also embodies the essence of Manchu folk traditions(Chunmei, 2018; Guangbin & Yan, 2007; Ke 2019).

During the Qing Dynasty (1636–1912), particularly under the rule of Emperor Kangxi (1661–1722), Manchu embroidery gained prominence as a refined court art form. It became a required skill for women, symbolizing virtue and reinforcing social hierarchy. Often referred to as ‘Royal Embroidery of Manchu’ (REM) it had flourished for nearly 400 years, serving not only as decoration but also as a medium to denote political status, cultural identity, folk customs and aesthetic representation(Cao, 2024; Ke 2019; Rongchao, 2012).

However, following the fall of Qing Dynasty in 1911, the embroidery began to decline. Since formal teaching of embroidery making among women stopped, the skill and application also starting to diminish, leading to a decline in application and practice. Since embroidery skills were traditionally passed down by elder generations, the discontinuation of practise resulted a significant loss of knowledge and understanding gap among younger generation. Social transformations, including the collapse of the resettlement system and displacement of Manchu descendants, further disrupted traditional transmission channels(Liang, 2020). In regions such as Ulla in Jilin, which was once the stronghold of Manchu heritage had witnessed absence of institutional support which led to the fading of cultural understanding and practise. Additionally, younger generations increasingly prioritize formal and standardise education systems, later migrate to bigger cities, resulting to misunderstanding of the symbolic interpretaion of its motifs and lesser usage in contemporaty product application(SaSa, 2022; Shuning, 2019).

In today’s contemporary era, Manchu design elements found in its embroidery motifs are frequently incorporated into homogenized commercial products, particularly in textile-based souvenir items at touristy venues such as restaurants, museums, and hotels (Chunmei, 2018; Huan, 2016; Jingyi, 2020; Liang, 2020; SaSa, 2022; Shuning, 2019). However, these elements are often take away the symbolic and hierarchical meanings, resulting in a lack of cultural authenticity (Fei, 2018; Lifei, 2022; Xu, 2016; Yang, 2014). Many commercially available Manchu-based products employ sub-standard materials and distorted motifs, disregarding traditional colour palettes, symbolism, and aesthetic principles (Huan, 2016; Wenchi, 2023; Xiaomeng, 2022). These actions had further exacerbate the loss of genuine cultural expression (Hexiao, 2019; Xiaoying, 2019).

Moreover, sacred motifs and royal emblems are often unappropriatly applied in cultural-based merchandises, where their symbolic significance is overlooked or misunderstood (Jingyi, 2020; Ke 2019). Designers and entrepreneurs capitalise on the visual appeal of Manchu motifs and patterns, by applying them into souvenir products and fashion with slight regard for historical connection (Guangbin & Yan, 2007; H. Wang 2017). As a result, the motifs once instilled with deep cultural connotation has risk of being extinct.

This study is focusing in answering the research question on how to appropriately apply the REM in textile-based products for contemporary use? Accordingly, the objective of this research is to propose methods for the proper adaptation of REM motifs into contemporary design



application(Huan, 2016; Jingyi, 2020).

This study explores the traditions of folk and court embroidery during the Qing Dynasty, with a focus on the symbolic significance and cultural identity embedded in Manchu patterns (Szonyi, 1997; Xiaohan & Yajie, 2023; Yang, 2014; Yang, liu, 2021). Attention is given to the distinctive features of Manchu folk motifs as expressed through everyday objects such as purses, pillow tops, and garments, as well as accessories like ring covers, eyeglass cases, and handkerchief bags (Rongchao, 2012; Shuning, 2019). By analyzing the form, function, and cultural resonance of these designs, the study aims to support sustainable, culturally respectful applications of traditional embroidery in modern creative industries.



Figure 1: Royal embroidery products for sale

(Source: <https://www.aliexpress.com/item/1005004580360156.html>)



Figure 2: Embroidered motifs used for rental costume the ancient town of Ula Manchu

(Source: <https://www.aliexpress.com/item/1005004580360156.html>)

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Manchu Embroidery

According to Ackerman (1962), style refers to the collective relationships among works of art, reflecting their inter-connectedness within a specific time, place, or among particular individuals or communities. Artistic styles often influence a variety of crafts within the same cultural context. With the advancement in technologies, totemic symbol which was traditionally carved on wood was then transferred into various application such as on fabrics or clothing, whereby it represent the culture and relation to ancestral beliefs. This act had mainly contributes to the usage of REM motifs on various application such as seen on royal saddles, which is considered as appropriate use of Manchu embroidery (Hexiao, 2019; Huan, 2016; Xiaomeng, 2022).

The practice ultimately had laid to the foundation of REM style that persisted into the Qing Dynasty. During this period, embroidery was not only embodied aesthetic values but also served as a structure to define social hierarchies, identity, and political ideologies.

2.2 Structure in Royal Embroidery

Lévi-Strauss' theory of structuralism offers a useful framework for analysing how motifs of REM are organised into meaningful categories and hierarchical ranks. Structuralism, particularly in anthropology and cultural studies, seeks to identify the underlying structures that govern human behavior, language, and symbolic systems. One of its core principles is binary opposition, the idea that meaning arises from the contrast between conceptual pairs



such as sacred/profane, male/ female, noble/ common (Duche-Perez & Gutierrez-Aguilar; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Osborne, 2008; Sicher, 1986).

This paper investigates into the application of binary opposition as an analytical framework for deciphering social hierarchies, particularly emphasizing how visual language constructs and reinforces these divisions. Specifically, it examines how the semiotics of visual elements, such as clothing, function as a system of signification to communicate social and cultural meanings, thereby articulating power dynamics and stratification (Barthes & Rifat, 1998; Chandler, 1994). This approach aligns with established semiotic theories, which suggest that clothing, beyond its utilitarian function, operates as a complex visual sign system that conveys nuanced messages about identity, status, and social roles (Boero; Owyong, 2009; Sharify & Maleki, 2020). For instance, scholars frequently employ semiotic analysis to deconstruct how specific vestimentary codes embedded within fashion express underlying social structures and power differentials (Sharov, 2019). This analytical lens reveals how sartorial choices, interpreted through semiotic frameworks, contribute to the stratification of social classes and the valuation of individual market worth within a given society (Mao & Smolik, 2025). This is further underscored by the way fashion acts as a social measurement, influencing perceptions of self-worth and creating competition for social approval, often leading to immediate judgments based on attire (Gorham, Cohen, & Morris, 1997). Such judgments are not merely superficial but are deeply embedded in the "discourse of the garment," which transforms clothing into a visual discourse that reflects and reinforces cultural experiences and societal norms (Xie, 2021).

When applied to Manchu embroidery, structuralism enables the analysis on how certain motifs reflect deeper social hierarchy. For instance, specific patterns were reserved for royalty or high-ranking officials, while others were designated for lower ranks or ceremonial use (Cohen, Hayes, & Hayes, 1971). By applying this theoretical lens, researchers can translate how motifs are systematically arranged and how they communicate rank, role, and cultural values within Manchu society (Ding & Naeim, 2025; Кайхе, 2023).

This perspective facilitates a deeper understanding of how embroidery functioned not just as decoration, but as a visual language embedded in cultural meaning and social order.

2.3 Contemporary Textile Design and Cultural Heritage

The integration of traditional motifs into contemporary design is a significant trend in the global fashion and textile industry. This practice, often termed "sustainable culture" in design, focuses on preserving intangible cultural heritage through innovative application (Gondoputranto & Dibia, 2022; Ma, 2021; Saddhono, Widodo, Al-Makmun, & Tozu, 2014). However, a common challenge is the superficial use of cultural symbols without deep understanding, led to a loss of meaning and authenticity; an issue which is clearly observed in the current usage on commercial products (Park, 2022).

Scholars argue for a steadier approach; for instance, research on applying Chinese traditional patterns in modern design that focus on the need for "deconstruction and reconstruction" – breaking down traditional elements to understand their core cultural significance before reassembling them in innovative ways by respecting their origin (Yi, 2009). Similarly, studies on Scottish tartan pattern or Japanese *kasuri* demonstrate that successful revitalization involves a deep discourse between tradition and modernity, where historical meanings are translated rather than discarded (Gondoputranto & Dibia, 2022; Shin, Cassidy, & Moore, 2011; Yukimatsu, Chantachon, Pothisane, & Kobsiriphat, 2008).



Prior literature underscores the urge of current study. It highlights a gap that this research aims to address: the need for a methodological framework using cultural theory (like structuralism and semiotics) to guide the appropriate and authentic application of REM motifs in contemporary textile design, whereby migrating from superficial aesthetic imitation to meaningful cultural connotation.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative data using descriptive approach, by utilizing triangulation analysis of data obtained from museum collections, visual archives, and scholarly literature. The analytical framework combines semiotic analysis (Barthes & Rifat, 1998; Chandler, 1994) to decode motif symbolism with Lévi-Strauss (1963) structuralist theory to examine the hierarchical systems embedded in REM. This approach allows for a deep exploration of how specific motifs, patterns, and compositional structures convey hierarchical distinctions and cultural narratives, moving beyond superficial aesthetic appreciation to uncover embedded meanings (Gorham et al., 1997).

It seeks to identify the underlying structural principles that govern the arrangement and interpretation of these elements, thereby revealing the system through which status, identity, and values were communicated within Qing society (Akçetin, 2021; Buoye, 1995). By applying a semiotic lens, this research endeavors to decipher the intricate visual vocabulary of Manchu embroidery, treating each design element as a signifier within a broader cultural code (Chandler, 1994). This method facilitates the identification of both denotative and connotative meanings, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how these visual elements functioned as markers of social stratification and cultural belief systems (LaVey, 2021; Musaeva, 2023). Furthermore, this investigation considers the perspectives of contemporary academics in textiles, art, and culture to bridge the historical understanding with present-day interpretations and challenges in preserving such intricate cultural knowledge (Ackerman, 1962; Hood, 1990).

3.1 Data collection

3.1.1 Observation

Fieldwork had been conducted in areas historically associated with Manchu heritage, particularly in the ancient Manchu settlement of Ulla, located in Jilin City, China. Observations will focus on surviving examples of Manchu embroidery displayed in local museums, cultural institutions, and commercial settings. Field notes and photographic documentation will be used to record the motifs, colours, material usage, and their contextual presentation.

3.1.2 Secondary data: visual documentation/ pictures

Secondary data was gathered from historical archives, museum collections, academic publications, and verified digital libraries. These include visual documentation of Manchu embroidery from different historical periods, enabling diachronic analysis of motif use and symbolic evolution. Of particular focus are three embroidered dragon robes (auspicious robes) from the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty (1736–1796), a time when the Qing dress code was systematized and imperial embroidery reached its peak of symbolic sophistication. These robes

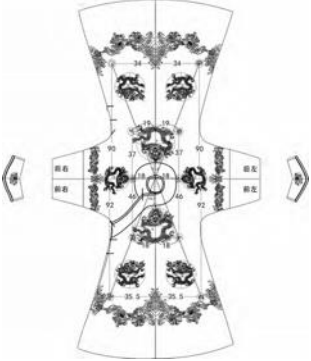


represent a critical phase in the codification of royal embroidery and the consolidation of Manchu aesthetic thought (Yan, Fang, & Annie, 2010; Yehong, 2010; Yongkuang, 2014).

4.0 RESULTS

The following section presents a semiotic analysis of key motifs found in REM. The analysis examines both the signifiers (visual motifs and colours) and their signified meanings (the symbolic and cultural connotations):

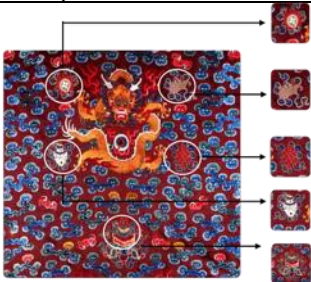
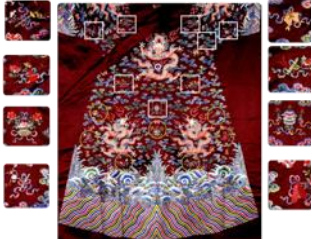
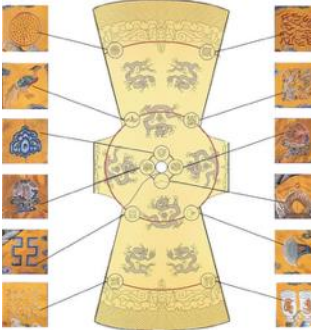
Table 1: Semiotic analysis

No	Signified Motifs	Signifier:	Usage
1	 Fig 1. Mythological and Natural Motifs (Yan et al., 2010).	As seen in Fig. 1 (Yan et al., 2010), RME combines mythological motifs, such as dragons, with natural elements like mountains, clouds, and the sea. These natural features are considered aesthetically ideal and symbolically powerful, as they are believed to be protected by supernatural beings. The dragon, a key mythological figure, symbolizes divine authority and supernatural power, thus earning veneration and symbolic prominence. The background colours used, imperial yellow, dark red, and lapis lazuli (a deep blue-black), also carry strong cultural significance, being favored by the Manchu aristocracy (Buoye, 1995).	These embroidery motifs and colours are strictly reserved for the emperor, representing his supreme status and divine mandate.
2	 Fig 2. The Nine Dragons Motif (Wei & Liu 2015).	As shown in Figure 2, the dragon robe typically features nine dragons: five on the front, four on the back, and one hidden on the inside lining (Xiaoting, 2021). This configuration holds profound meaning rooted in the I Ching, where the combination of the numbers nine and five signifies "the flying dragon in the heavens", symbolizing supreme authority and auspicious fortune. This "nine-five" structure not only distinguishes the emperor's robe but is also reflected in other elements of the royal embroidery system, reinforcing a codified hierarchy through visual semiotics (Ke 2019; Wei & Liu 2015; Xiaoting, 2021).	Only be used for the King as the supreme ruler of Manchu, in China

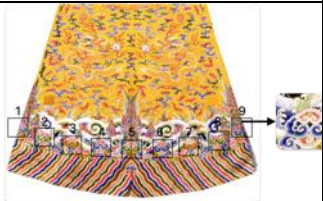


3	 Fig 3: The 9–5 layout in Qing palace dress (Yan et al., 2010).	The 9–5 configuration demonstrates hierarchical symbolism among dragons: the central dragon is the most honorable, flanked by smaller dragons to imply support and unity. This reflects not only cosmological order but also Manchu sociopolitical hierarchy. Modern reinterpretations that deconstruct this layout risk erasing these culturally specific meanings(Fei, 2018; Xiaoting, 2021).	Restricted to the Emperor and close royal family members, reinforcing dynastic legitimacy and internal unity.
4	 Fig 4: Dragon with five claws(Yan et al., 2010).	The five-clawed dragon occupies the central and most prominent position in the 9–5 motif structure. Its symmetrical body, forward-facing head, and commanding presence represent supreme power, balance, and cosmic order. The number of claws signifies status: five claws denote imperial authority, while four claws are limited to nobility. The dragon appears on backgrounds of yellow, red, or lapis lazuli, colours exclusive to the emperor and symbolizing majesty and virtue (Xiaoting, 2021; Yehong, 2010; F. Zhang, 2009).	Reserved strictly for the emperor and royal family members. The dragon motif acts as the central signifier of imperial legitimacy and cosmic alignment. Unauthorized usage was historically forbidden and culturally inappropriate.
5	 Fig 5: Ascending dragon motif (Yan et al., 2010).	The ascending dragon, shown in profile with an upward-facing head and undulating torso, symbolizes loyal support to the central five-clawed dragon. This motif visually reinforces the hierarchical unity and dynastic power of the Manchu court. According to Yang (2014), its symmetrical placement signifies duality and cosmic harmony. The smaller size and fixed lower-front position further affirm its subordinate but essential role.	Exclusively used for the emperor's robe, positioned beneath the central dragon. It must appear in symmetrical pairs and should never be placed alone or in the center. Misuse, such as isolated appearance or misplacement, is considered a violation of traditional symbolic order.
6	 Fig 6: Horseshoe	The horseshoe-shaped cuff is a unique structural feature of Manchu royal attire. The embroidery on the sleeve mirrors motifs found on the robe, such as dragons and sea cliffs, though at a smaller scale. Black backgrounds and edge embroidery reflect traditional	Reserved for Manchu rulers and their immediate family members.



	Sleeve (Yan et al., 2010).	Manchu aesthetics and textile structure (F. Zhang, 2009).	
7	 Fig 7: Edge embroidery (Yan et al., 2010).	Edge embroidery mirrors the robe's main elements (central dragon, ascending dragon, cliff/sea patterns), reinforcing symbolic consistency across the entire garment. These motifs signal identity and rank, even when viewed in isolation(Cao, 2024; F. Zhang, 2009).	Only for those who are the highest rulers of Manchu, China and their important relatives.
8	 Fig 8: Buddhist Eight Treasures (Yan et al., 2010).	TThis religious motif, drawn from Buddhist iconography, signifies protection and sacred authority. Of the Eight Treasures, only five are often selectively used around the dragon motif to reflect the emperor's personal taste and emphasize auspicious symbolism (5 = dignity)(Szonyi, 1997; Xiaoting, 2021).	Exclusively used by the emperor.
9	 Fig 9: Miscellaneous treasure (Yan et al., 2010).	A broader set of over 30 symbolic motifs derived from Buddhist tradition. Used in groups of five around the main dragon to signal status and divine connection. Individual motif selection reflects imperial preference and spiritual lineage(Szonyi, 1997; Xiaoting, 2021).	Only be used for the King as the supreme ruler of Manchu, China
10	 Fig 10: Twelve Imperial Crests(Xiaoting, 2021).	Considered even more significant than the dragon motif. Comprising natural elements (sun, moon, stars, mountains, etc.), these crests represent virtuous rule and moral integrity. They must remain in fixed positions and colours. Only the emperor's robe features the full set(Ke 2019).	Exclusively for the emperor; never altered in position or colour.

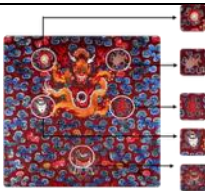


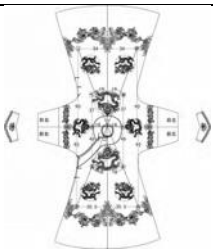
11	 Fig 11: Bat motif (source: book 1980).	“Bat” (蝠, fu) is a homophone for “fortune” (福, fu) in Chinese. Red bats (symbolizing hongfu or “great blessing”) are used in abundance to denote longevity and auspiciousness. Historically linked to Manchu ancestor worship of spirit birds like the eagle(Xiaoting, 2021).	For Manchu royalty and their close family members; represents prosperity and continuity.
12	 Fig 12: Colourful Cloud Motif (Yan et al., 2010).	This symmetrical five-colour motif signifies auspiciousness as vast as the heavens. Often placed near dragons to create the visual of a dragon soaring through a heavenly sky. Symmetry and complexity increase its ceremonial prestige(R. Wang & Zhao, 2017; Xiaoting, 2021).	Reserved for royal use; symbolizes cosmic favor and majestic rank.
13	 Fig 13: Cliff Motif (Yan et al., 2010).	Cliffs paired with waves represent harmony between myth and nature. They imply a peaceful and prosperous reign under divine protection. Their multicoloured five-element scheme reflects the Manchu cosmological worldview and the Five Directions. Variants may include embedded bat or floral patterns (Xiaoting, 2021; Yanhui & Hongfu, 2020).	Used exclusively by Manchu royalty; misrepresented in contemporary reproductions, leading to symbolic loss.
14	 Fig 14: Seawater Motif (Yan et al., 2010).	The lowest visual layer beneath the robe's design. The sea motif grounds the overall composition, symbolizing stability and balance. Colour, count (often 9 groups), and symmetry correspond to the emperor's status and align with cosmological principles(Yanhui & Hongfu, 2020).	Reserved for royalty; complexity and colour differentiation signify rank.

Suggestions of application on contemporary / commercial products:

Table 2: Suggestion of Motifs Applications

Type	Design	Appropriate application on products	Suggestions
Replica	 1. Royal embroidery consisting of mythological and natural motifs	A contemporary product such as a plush toy, magnet, or postcard featuring a stylised replica of a Manchurian emperor in full royal costume adorned with traditional Manchu embroidery motifs can effectively represent the complete visual identity of royal embroidery. By incorporating both mythological and natural motifs in a cohesive design, these products preserve the richness and symbolic meaning of the original art, making them ideal for modern reinterpretations. Reproductions with the right design form have an emotional evocative effect. For a start, the series of products can be scaled down and made into souvenir collections. For example: the Pharaohs replica in full costume that reflect the cultural characteristics and costume through its appearance.	 Picture 1: Decorative items/ ornamentation proposal

Motifs	 2. The Twelve Chapters and the Eight Treasures in 'Blind Boxes'	The Royal Manchu Embroidery is a complete system to reflect ranks in the Dynasty. The Twelve Chapter Symbols and the Eight Treasures motifs function as distinct and structured sub systems within the overall framework of Royal Manchu Embroidery. A "blind box" is a type of mystery-packaged collectible product that has gained immense popularity among youth, especially in China and other parts of Asia. Each collection usually features multiple characters or variations—some common, others classified as rare or limited edition. For instance, Labubu, a widely adored character from the Pop Mart designer toy line, is frequently sold through blind boxes. Customers may receive a regular version, or if lucky, a rare "chase" variant. The concept of a complete set of blind box products can be used to introduce the embroidery motifs of the Twelve Seals and the Eight Treasures as a complete collectable units, which complete series can form a motif. Other products like refrigerator stickers, brooches, and pendants can also use these motifs. Blind boxes help to create a sense of personalization and collecting experience. It also directs the consumer's attention to the content of the Twelve Chapters. This is currently the most popular product format among the young generation (Ren & Ma, 2023; L. Zhang & Phakdeephrot, 2023; Y. Zhang & Zhang, 2022).	 Picture 2: Boxes / souvenir item packaging: (source: web).
	 3. Buddhist eight treasures motif on textile products	The Buddhist Eight Treasures motif is also categorized as a separate unit in the embroidery sub system. The motif consists of 5 different design to create a complete composition. The entire 5 embroidery designs can be used separately in a design, which makes it suitable for collection in textile products, like patches, T-shirts, towels, handkerchief or scarves. Ironable patches for example, (sell separately) can be applied to any textile products of their own. They can design their own five motifs arrangement, that will be appealing to customers. By having these motifs close to	 Picture 3: T-shirt design

		what they are wearing or using, they will be familiarized with the Manchurian culture, thus add interest in learning the history and meaning(Chen, Chang, Hsieh, & Chang, 2022). These mythological series suggested in Table 1 can also be designed as an independent motifs, paired with other products or mix and match with any royal embroidery designs. This will create an interesting combination that makes it more versatile for contemporary application, thus cater interest for younger consumers.	
Textile motifs on general product	 4. Nine-to-five design (five-clawed dragon and gentle ascending dragon pattern)	Since the characteristic of motifs found in Manchu Royal Embroidery are independent, repetitive and highly recognizable, they can be divided into a few representative position (Chen et al., 2022). The motifs can be used on several position (left/ right/ centre view) that can be separated once repeated and used on something else. The position of motifs can be applied on handmade handbags, pillows, handkerchiefs, etc. The Nine to Five motifs can be embroidered on high-grade materials, turned into limited items to emphasize its association with noble traditions and exclusive privileges, reminiscent from the past certain cultural traits. (Pic 4).	 Picture 4: Extracting motifs from actual application on traditional costumes
	 5. Cliffs Sea Ripple	The separated position can be used for making distinctive ornaments (Jingyi, 2020). Cliff and sea water motifs are fixed combinations, and the elements are more recognizable when put as embroidery border. It can be designed as a stand-alone element. Innovative combinations of products with distinctive borders, such as umbrellas and carpets, can be created by carefully embroidering the motifs on the edges. By retaining the position as the border, it is ensured that the composition respects the traditional design principles.	 Picture 5: Umbrella

	 6. Decorative motifs (bat motifs, horseshoe sleeves, border embroidery)	Bat motifs, horseshoe sleeves and edge embroidery are distinctive design of Manchu embroidery. The characteristics of traditional Manchu motifs are suitable for independent placement that can be applied onto various products, suit as souvenir items and highly commercialised. For example, bookmarks, pendants, computer bags and hand fan can highlight the unique image characteristics, emphasizes on the cultural symbols of Manchu.	 Picture 5: Hand fan
--	--	---	--

4.1 Pattern Analysis Using Structuralist Theory

The analysis of REM motifs through the lens of structuralism, particularly Levi-Strauss' theory of binary oppositions, offers a deeper understanding of the hierarchical structures and symbolic meanings embedded in these traditional designs. Structuralism postulates that cultural phenomena are governed by underlying systems of oppositional logic, and within the context of Manchu embroidery, such oppositions (e.g., central vs. peripheral, symmetrical vs. asymmetrical, large vs. small, dragon types, number of claws) reveal the codified social order of the Qing imperial court.

By applying this theoretical framework, the study systematically examines the visual data of REM patterns to uncover their formal structure and symbolic function. The findings demonstrate that motifs are not merely decorative, but operate as structured signifiers of rank, legitimacy, and imperial cosmology. For instance, the central five-clawed dragon, placed prominently in the "9-5" layout, signifies supreme power and can only be worn by the emperor or closely related members of the royal family. Supporting motifs, such as the ascending dragon or shoulder dragons, visually reinforce the central authority and reflect hierarchical distinctions.

This analytical approach allows for a culturally sensitive interpretation that distinguishes authentic motif applications from modern appropriations that lack contextual grounding. By decoding the structural logic of motif placement and symbolism, the research provides clear guidelines for the appropriate adaptation of RME in contemporary textile and fashion design. It also contributes to the discourse on heritage preservation by proposing methods that maintain cultural integrity while enabling creative innovation.

In sum, the integration of Levi-Strauss' structuralist theory with visual motif analysis provides a rigorous framework for understanding, conserving, and ethically recontextualizing Royal Manchu Embroidery in modern design practices. This ensures that contemporary adaptations do not merely replicate form but also honor the deep cultural meanings historically embedded in REM's visual language.

Table 2: Structural Oppositions in Royal Embroidery of Manchu (REM)

(Source: Author)

Binary Opposition	Imperial Use	Rank Use	Symbolic Function
Motif Size & Position	Large, central motif (main dragon on chest/back)	Smaller, peripheral motifs (shoulder dragons, ascending dragons)	Visual hierarchy centrality = supreme power; periphery = support/submission
Motif Orientation	Forward-facing five-clawed dragon	Side-facing ascending dragons	Direct confrontation = sovereignty; lateral pose = assistance or lower status
Claw Count	Five claws (Emperor only)	Four claws (Princes, high officials)	Codified rank system in Qing clothing law
Number of Motifs	Nine dragons (9-5 layout)	Fewer or asymmetrical arrangements	Cosmological completeness (9 = yang, celestial power)
Colour Use	Bright yellow, exclusively imperial	Blue, brown, or other tones	Yellow = Earth center in Chinese cosmology; other colours indicate rank or regional assignment
Garment Placement	Central panel (chest, back, hem)	Side panels, sleeves, shoulders	Central = authority, periphery = support
Symmetry	Perfect bilateral symmetry	Minor asymmetry or singular motifs	Harmony and control (symmetry) reflect Confucian order and cosmic balance

5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of structuralism and binary opposition, this study reveals that the symbolic system underlying in REM during the Qing dynasty is primarily constructed through dichotomous structures, most notably between mythological and natural motifs. Mythological motifs, such as dragons and phoenixes, are imbued with cosmological and political symbolism, representing imperial authority, celestial order, and divine legitimacy. In contrast, natural motifs, such as clouds, waves, and mountains, serve to frame and elevate these mythical elements, while also carrying their own structured meanings relating to hierarchy and auspiciousness.

The structural analysis of REM offers valuable implications for contemporary fashion and textile design. By understanding the hierarchical significance and symbolic logic embedded in these traditional motifs, designers can thoughtfully integrate them into modern garments, accessories,



or home textiles. Such integration not only pays homage to the rich cultural heritage of Manchu embroidery but also aligns with ethical practices of cultural preservation and adaptation.

However, a recurring challenge in this contemporary adaptation is the prevalent decontextualization of Manchu motifs, where their rich symbolic and hierarchical meanings are often stripped away in commercial applications (Lu et al., 2022) (Singh & Singh, 2025) (Haifan et al., 2023) (Lunde, 2018). This phenomenon frequently results in the homogenization of Manchu design elements, particularly when incorporated into mass-produced textile-based souvenir items at tourist venues (Liu et al., 2024) (Yin et al., 2024). This decontextualization frequently leads to a dilution of their authentic cultural identity and techniques, as designers often incorporate these elements without proper respect or accurate interpretation (Liu et al., 2024). This practice reduces complex cultural symbols to mere aesthetic elements, diminishing their inherent value and historical significance (Wang, 2019). This decontextualization also poses a significant threat to the preservation of traditional craft forms, as the commodification of motifs without their cultural context can lead to a misunderstanding and devaluation of the artistry involved (Herbawi et al., 2023). This widespread removal of symbolic and hierarchical depth reduces the motifs to superficial decorative elements, preventing a deeper appreciation of Manchu cultural heritage among consumers (Bin, 2019). This reduction often results from a lack of awareness regarding the original meanings of these symbols and the limited interpretative taxonomies available for the visual system, thereby exposing the craft to risks of cultural appropriation (Herbawi et al., 2023). This commercialization often transforms culturally significant motifs into generalized patterns, eroding their original purpose and spiritual significance (Imbesi et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the application of Lévi-Strauss's structural theory to the study of Royal Manchu Embroidery reveals a sophisticated system of visual oppositions and symbolic communication. Translating these insights into contemporary product design provides a meaningful pathway to both preserve and reinterpret this intangible cultural heritage, ensuring that its legacy continues to inspire and educate future generations through fashion and textile innovation.

References

- Anwar, S., & Ali, K. (2021). [Title of the article/book]. [Journal/Publisher]. [https://doi.org/\(DOI\)](https://doi.org/(DOI))
- Bin, H. (2019). Exploring Contemporary Visualizations of Traditional Chinese Symbols: A Case of Tea Packaging Design. *The Design Journal*, 23(2), 309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2019.1699763>
- Boero, M. (2023). Sociosemiotics of Fashion: Theory, Trends, and Communication Tools. In *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research/Advances in social science, education and humanities research* (p. 4). https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-140-1_2
- Chen, T.-Y., Chang, W.-C., Hsieh, K.-J., & Chang, C.-T. (2022). Advancing Taiwan's traditional craft products: A modular product design model of manufacturing technologies. *Technology in Society*, 71, 102103. doi:
- Chunmei, Z. (2018). Analysis on the Current Situation and Development Strategies of Manchu Embroidery Products in Hebei Province. *Technology information*, 16(30), 224-225. doi:10.16661/j.cnki.1672-3791.2018.30.224
- Fei, L. (2018). Research on royal and aristocratic costumes in the early Qing Dynasty: Shandong University Press.



- Fuliang, Z. (2009). On the beauty of the craftsmanship of dragon robe pattern weaving and embroidery in the Qing Dynasty. *silk*(08), 48-51.
- Guangbin, C., & Yan, Z. (2007). Research on the development of Manchu folk culture tourism in Liaoning Province. *Manchu Studies*(1), 31-38.
- Haifan, S., Ramli, M. F., & Hajianfard, R. (2023). Fabric Icons: The Impact of Traditional Costume Patterns on Ethnic Identity of the Sichuan Qiang Community. *Global Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(8), 42. <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol11n84255>
- Herbawi, B. B., Chatterjee, A., & Alvelos, H. (2023). Embroidered heritage: a design-led visual ethnography of traditional Palestinian motifs. In *Academia Press eBooks*. Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.26530/9789401496476-121>
- Haitao, Y. (2014). From craftsmanship to spirit——folk emotions and cultural expressions of weaving and embroidery art in past dynasties. *artwork*(01), 8-25.
- Hexiao, Z. (2019). Cultural and creative product design based on Manchu traditional embroidery. Shenyang Aerospace University,
- Huan, L. (2016). Research on the design of tourist souvenirs with Manchu characteristics in Jilin Province. (master). Jilin Jianzhu University, Available from Cnki
- Hui, W. (2017). Research on the application of Manchu costume patterns in modern costume design. (master). Retrieved from Available from Cnki
- Imbesi, L., Keppie, K., Vaes, K., Verlinden, J., Timmerman, K., Killi, S., Maffei, S., Bianchini, M., Campenhout, L. V., Hacigüzeller, P., Doubrovski, E. L., Casciani, D., & Chkanikova, O. (2023). Connectivity and creativity in times of conflict. In *Academia Press eBooks*. Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.26530/9789401496476>
- Jiaru, W., & Ruipu, L. (2015). Twelve crests of the late Qing dynasty dragon robe "cross-shaped" structure and heraldic regulations. *artistic exploration*, 29(03), 39-43+34. doi:10.13574/j.cnki.artsexp.2015.03.010
- Jingyi, J. (2020). Research on the new expression of Manchu patterns in the design of Shenyang regional characteristic tourism cultural and creative products. (master). Shenyang Normal University, Available from Cnki
- Liang, Z. (2020). The inheritance and development of Manchu folk embroidery. Shenyang Normal University,
- Lifei, Y. (2022). Research on the digital expression of Manchu patterns in the context of new media. (硕士). Retrieved from Available from Cnki
- Liu, C., Wu, Y., Cui, R., & Liang, H. (2024). *Sustaining traditional clothing styles and cultural heritage: A multiple case analysis approach*. <https://doi.org/10.31274/itaa.17119>
- Lu, X., Wen, J., & Shao, X. (2022). Pattern Design of Ethnic Clothing Based on Stretchable Nanofiber Fabrics. *Advances in Materials Science and Engineering*, 2022, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/7370958>



- Lunde, K. S. (2018). *Ancient, Indigenous and Iconic Textile Motifs in Contemporary Fashion Case Study: Defining Concepts through Textile Designs: Appropriation, Collaboration, Provenance and Identity*. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2097&context=tsaconf>
- Mitkus, T., & Jablonskyte, R. (2025). AI in visually based creative industries: when the dust settles. *Research Portal Denmark*, 11, 17. <https://local.forskningsportal.dk/local/dki-cgi/ws/cris-link?src=via&id=via-85651173-df57-42fa-84dc-7eb5c7542e07&ti=AI%20in%20visually%20based%20creative%20industries%3A%20when%20the%20dust%20settles>
- Ren, L., & Ma, C. (2023). Planning the unplannable—How blind box tourism boosts purchase intentions. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 13567667231168643.
- Rong, X. (2016). Research on the inheritance of Qing Dynasty court weaving and embroidery skills in Chinese haute couture wedding wear. *China Ethnic Expo*(12), 225-226. Retrieved from
- Rongchao, L. (2012). The artistic characteristics and connotations of Manchu folk embroidery. (master). Retrieved from Available from Cnki
- SaSa, Z. (2022). Research on the design of ice and snow tourism cultural and creative products in Jilin Province based on intangible cultural heritage handicrafts. (master). Jilin Jianzhu University, Available from Cnki
- Sharov, K. K. (2019). Visual Semiotics Of Feminine Fashion: A Concise Analysis. *ΠΡΑΞΗΜΑ Journal of Visual Semiotics*, 1, 173. <https://doi.org/10.23951/2312-7899-2019-1-173-195>
- Shuning, C. (2019). Research on the artistic characteristics, inheritance and development of Manchu folk embroidery in Jinzhou. *Journal of Suzhou Vocational and Technical College of Arts and Crafts*(03), 26-29.
- Singh, N., & Singh, M. (2025). Traditional embroidery revival for sustainability: a systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis. *Discover Sustainability*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-00944-0>
- Wahed, W. J. E., Saad, N., & Yusoff, S. B. M. (2022). Academics' Perspectives of The Visual Complexity and Community Acceptance of Pua Kumbu Textile. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(5). <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v12-i5/13186>
- Wang, L. (2019, January 1). Inheritance and Innovation of Embroidery in Modern Design. *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Art Studies: Science, Experience, Education (ICASSEE 2019)*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/icassee-19.2019.47>
- Wenchi, F. (2023). Application of Northeast Manchu Traditional Embroidery Patterns in Cultural and Creative Product Design. *western leather*, 45(02), 108-110.
- Xie, F. (2021). The Discourse of the Garment from the Cultural Perspective. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research/Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210519.096>
- Xiaohan, W., & Yajie, L. (2023). Symbolic induction and metaphorical analysis of Heilongjiang Manchu embroidery patterns. *art research*(06), 150-152. doi:10.13944/j.cnki.ysyj.2023.0327
- Xiaomeng, Z. (2022). Research on cultural and creative product design based on Manchu traditional folk customs. (master). Shenyang University of Technology, Available from Cnki



- Xiaoting, G. (2021). Research on the decorative patterns of palace costumes in the mid-Qing Dynasty and its derivative design. (master). Retrieved from Available from Cnki
- Xiaoying, R. (2019). Research on the design of tourism cultural and creative products in Northeast China. (master). Retrieved from Available from Cnki
- xifeng, Z. (2015). Heilongjiang Kedong Manchu Folk Embroidery: Chinese version library.
- Yang, liu. (2021). Research on the composition of embroidery patterns on traditional Manchu clothing. (Master). Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, Available from Cnki
- Yehong, W. (2010). Research on dragon robes in the early Qing Dynasty (1616-1766). (PhD). Donghua University, Available from Cnki
- Yin, J., Cheng, Y., Yu, S., & Lin, J. (2024). An innovative application of diagonal ridge elements of classical Suzhou-style buildings to furniture design based on Kansei engineering and shape grammar. *BioResources*, 19(3), 5549. <https://doi.org/10.15376/biores.19.3.5549-5567>
- Yong, Y., Hongjun, F., & Yin, A. (2010). Qing Palace Clothing Illustration. Beijing: Palace Museum.
- Yongkuang, L. (2014). A general history of court culture in the Qing Dynasty. In: Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Exhibition.
- Zhang, L., & Phakdeephirot, N. (2023). The influence of blind box marketing on Consumers' purchase intention:--taking" POPMART" as an example. *Highlights in Art and Design*, 4(2), 154-160.
- Zhang, Y., & Zhang, T. (2022). The effect of blind box product uncertainty on consumers' purchase intention: The mediating role of perceived value and the moderating role of purchase intention. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 946527.

