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SHOE DESIGN INSPIRED BY THE SILK ROAD: COMBINING TRADITION AND MODERN INNOVATION

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This study examines the integration of national traditional elements from the Silk Road into modern shoe design. The main distinctive elements are Chinese embroidery, Persian geometric patterns and Central Asian leather craftsmanship. This craftsmanship has existed for thousands of years. Using cultural traditions and modern innovations in technology, we can create unique shoe designs that enhance aesthetics while maintaining the national identity of Chinese culture. In addition, integrating traditional elements into shoe design allows us to expand our product range and meet consumer demands.

Key words: Footwear, Design, Innovation, National identity, Aesthetic and Functional Value.

INTRODUCTION

It is known that China has a long history of development, with changes in clothing, textiles, and footwear occurring throughout the years. Wardrobes varied greatly depending on the dynasty, region, status, and owner, and these traditions have had a significant influence on modern clothing and footwear today. The Silk Road, as a corridor of cultural exchange, has influenced various design fields, yet its application in modern footwear remains underexplored. Footwear, as a cultural symbol, reflects identity and artistic expression, bridging historical and contemporary design. Traditionally, the national Chinese costume was richly decorated with embroidery, which included floral, geometric, etc. motifs. Each element of this embroidery had its own symbolism. The choice of color is no exception. The common feature of all color solutions is their brightness and saturation [1]. Patterns were applied to the products using different techniques, creating balanced and harmonious compositions. The Silk Road has had a huge influence on the integration of traditional elements in modern shoe design as a means of combining cultural heritage with modern innovation.

Research into the possibility of using national traditions in the design of modern shoes helps to preserve cultural authenticity and develop a variety of products, which is an urgent question.

PURPOSE

The aim of this study is to explore the integration of traditional elements into contemporary shoe design.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the context of globalization, the question of preserving national identity often arises. Despite the ever-changing trends in the fashion industry, more and more people look back to the traditional clothing of their ancestors to honor their heritage and bring back a touch of ancient charm to our modern, digital world [2]. Many designers look to traditional clothing as a source of inspiration and a way to showcase the beauty of national history and culture. Many creative artists and designers working in the world of high fashion have created designs that combine various international styles.

Chinese culture has a unique identity, deep roots and traditions. The tradition of creating shoes is no exception. As Chen [3] posits, traditional folk embroidery—an aspect of China's intangible cultural heritage—can innovate modern design by fulfilling contemporary consumers' demands for uniqueness and personalization. In traditional Chinese footwear, embroidery serves as the quintessence of craftsmanship to enhance aesthetic and cultural value. Various motifs are used: flora - lotus flowers, peonies (Fig.1), pomegranates, etc; geometric - swastika, ancient money pattern, Chinese knot etc (Fig.2); fauna - goldfish, dragons, tigers, swallow, or bat etc (Fig.3). All elements are symbolic lexicons conveying narratives of harmony, prosperity and strength. Fig.1 is an example of this tradition which is the Lake-Blue Satin Embroidered Lotus and Goldfish Yuanbao-Soled Cotton Shoes. Fig 2 shows the flowerpot soles embroidered with tiger patterns. The tiger's drooping beard has become a tassel that can swing with walking. The ancient money pattern is specially reflected in Fig 3.



Fig. 1. Lake satin embroidered lotus gold goldfish ingot cotton shoes in Qing Guangxu period [4]



Fig. 2. Yellow satin pile twill flower basin bottom shoes in Qing Guangxu period [4]



Fig. 3. Red satin-embroidered antique coin patterned basin bottom sandwich shoes [4]

The intricate design adheres closely to traditional techniques: the lotus and goldfish motifs are made using flat embroidery (ping xiu), characterized by smooth flat stitches that outline the shapes, and embroidery that uses grain stitches to create three-dimensionality. Multicolored silk threads in shades of lake blue, vermilion, pink, and green are interwoven to create a vibrant yet carefully ordered composition.

Contemporary designers often draw on national imagery when creating designs, and make extensive use of traditional Chinese shoe embellishments. For example, the Lotus Wedge Heels from Tom Ford's 2004 China Through the Looking Glass collection for Yves Saint Laurent (Fig. 4) use embroidery as a key



technique. The design reinterprets traditional iconography through a hybridity of materials: the upper combines black suede with glossy red patent leather, while three-dimensional lotus motifs are created using ostrich feather embroidery, accented with crystal beadwork and velvet edging to enhance the layering of the petals through chiaroscuro effects. The ankle strap, adorned with gilded chains, echoes the opulent aesthetics of Chinese court dress. Notably, there is no overt fish motif; however, the open-toe silhouette reminiscent of a “fish mouth” (yu zui) subtly alludes to the traditional narrative of “fish playing among the lotus,” fusing historical metaphor with modernist abstraction. In terms of chromaticism, the polychromatic interplay of “lake-colored satin and multi-colored threads” in the traditional shoe is transformed into a monochrome black and red palette, eschewing narrative complexity in favor of an intuitive visual impact in the foreground—reimagining oriental luxury as “luxurious audacity.”



Fig. 4. Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent YSL Lotus Heels 2004 [5]



Fig. 5. A Rare Pair of Tatar Warrior Boots [6]



Fig. 6. Modern cowboy boot design integrating Tatar boot craftsmanship [7]

The Tatar Boots (Fig 5) originated from Central Asian nomadic cultures, notably Kazakhstan, with design features such as high shafts, scimitar-shaped soles, and leather reflecting pastoral functionality. Initially, their stitching served structural purposes—for example, dense overlock stitches to resist sandstorms. Over time, these stitches evolved into decorative symbols: chain stitches formed wave patterns symbolizing natural landscapes, while dyed threads and leather enhanced visual contrast (Fig. 6). The depicted cowboy boots adopt the iconic high-shaft structure and scimitar-shaped soles of Tatar boots.

To meet modern demands, designers replace traditional hemp threads with fluorescent silicone threads, retaining hand-stitched textures while improving nighttime visibility. The laser-engraved geometric patterns on the heel abstract cultural symbols from Tatar chain stitching, achieving a digital translation of traditional techniques. This design not only preserves the nomadic ethos of “utility as aesthetics” but also enhances wearability through material upgrades—such as lightweight leather and abrasion-resistant rubber—offering new pathways for the contemporary adaptation of traditional elements.



CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates the successful integration of traditional national elements into contemporary shoe design. The use of shoemaking traditions and national motifs are adapted to meet modern aesthetic and functional requirements. The use of bold color schemes enhances the visual appeal of the shoes, while the reinterpretation of traditional patterns bridges the gap between heritage and innovation, between tradition and modernity.

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ГАО Цююань, МЕЛЬНИК Л. ДИЗАЙН ВЗУТТЯ, НАТХНЕННИЙ ШОВКОВИМ ШЛЯХОМ: ПОЄДНАННЯ ТРАДИЦІЙ ТА СУЧАСНИХ ІННОВАЦІЙ

Це дослідження розглядає інтеграцію національних традиційних елементів Шовкового шляху в сучасний дизайн взуття. Основні відмітні елементи – китайська вишивка, перські геометричні візерунки та середньоазійська майстерність обробки шкіри. Це ремесло існує тисячі років. Використовуючи культурні традиції та сучасні інновації в технологіях, можна створити унікальний дизайн взуття, який покращує естетику, зберігаючи національну ідентичність китайської культури. Крім того, інтеграція традиційних елементів у дизайн взуття дозволяє розширити асортимент і задовольнити запити споживачів.

Ключові слова: взуття, дизайн, інновація, національна ідентичність, естетична та функціональна цінність.