



УДК 7.012: 687

## CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATION STRATEGIES FOR TRADITIONAL DECORATIVE LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF CRAFT NARRATIVES IN GUO PEI'S WORKS

JING Xuan<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kyiv National University of Technologies and Design, Ukraine

<sup>2</sup> Shaanxi University of Science & Technology, Xi'an, People's Republic of China  
*jingxuan0927666@gmail.com*

*This study explores translation strategies for traditional decorative language within contemporary fashion design, focusing on how craftsmanship is transformed into narrative expression in Guo Pei's works. Through literature review and case analysis of representative pieces, combined with design translation theory and decorative structure analysis, it systematically examines the decorative reconfiguration and craft enhancement pathways in works such as 'Golden Splendor', 'Blue and White Porcelain', 'Palace Blossoms', 'The Tale of the Dragon', 'Phoenix Seeking the Phoenix', 'Lotus-Born Noble Son Coat', and 'Fish-Water Harmony Skirt.' Findings indicate that through restructuring ornamental frameworks and amplifying craft materiality, Guo Pei transforms traditional decorative language from ancillary visual symbols into structural expressions with narrative function, achieving innovative translation of traditional craftsmanship within contemporary design contexts.*

**Key words:** *Traditional decorative language; Design translation; Craft narrative; Haute couture.*

### INTRODUCTION

Within the contemporary fashion discourse, the question of how traditional ornamental language can be translated into design while preserving its cultural essence has become a significant research topic in the field of fashion design. Guo Pei stands as a representative designer within China's haute couture sphere, renowned for her creations featuring dense hand embroidery, imperial ornamental motifs, and monumental structural silhouettes. Drawing enduring inspiration from traditional Chinese culture, she integrates decorative elements such as dragon-phoenix patterns, courtly floral motifs, religious symbols, and folk auspicious designs into contemporary bespoke garments (Fig. 1). Through the use of gold thread embroidery, three-dimensional appliqué and intricate structural support systems, her creations visually convey a powerful sense of volume and ceremonial grandeur, transforming garments from everyday wear into display pieces imbued with artistic qualities.

In this design practice, traditional decorative elements are not merely reproduced but undergo restructuring and intensification at the levels of structure,



scale and craftsmanship, forming a visual system with narrative functionality. Consequently, analysing the pathways of 'craft narrative' translation within Guo Pei's work helps reveal the reconfiguration of traditional decorative language within contemporary fashion design.



**Fig. 1.** Guo Pei: Chinese Art and Couture opened ACM's Season of Chinese Art in 2019 [4]

## PURPOSE

This study aims to explore translation strategies for traditional decorative language within contemporary fashion design, focusing on how craftsmanship in Guo Pei's work transforms from technical means into narrative mediums. It primarily addresses two questions: Firstly, how is traditional decorative language reconstructed at the structural level of design? Secondly, how do craft elements form narrative expressions at the visual and spatial levels, thereby achieving design innovation?

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comprehensive analysis of seven representative works – Da Jin, Blue-and-White Porcelain, Palace Flowers, The Tale of the Dragon, Phoenix Seeking Her Mate, Lotus-Born Noble Son Coat and Fish-Water Harmony Skirt – reveals that Guo Pei's application of traditional decorative language transcends mere pictorial transplantation. Instead, she achieves systematic translation through structural reconfiguration and enhanced craftsmanship. Within her design practice, traditional motifs evolve from ancillary decorative elements into the core language shaping overall form and visual order. Concurrently, craftsmanship transcends mere technical means for image realization, becoming a vital medium for constructing cultural narratives and emotional expression. Decoration and craft thus form a mutually reinforcing relationship, jointly generating the works' visual tension and symbolic significance. This translational approach preserves the cultural recognizability of traditional ornamental language while endowing it with new structural logic and modes of expression within a contemporary context.

### 1. Structural Reorganization of Decorative Language

In the aforementioned works, traditional ornamental elements are elevated to form the dominant structural framework of the garments. In 'Grand Gold' (Fig. 2), extensive gold thread embroidery and outward-expanding hoop structures transform dragon and cloud motifs from mere surface patterns into the core framework defining volume and visual focus; 'Blue and White Porcelain' (Figure 3) transforms the two-dimensional continuous imagery of ceramic patterns into a wraparound structure on the garment's curved surfaces, achieving a cross-media translation from object decoration to human adornment.



**Fig. 2.** Golden Splendor ,Guo Pei, Samsara Collection China, Beijing,2006; Silk, wire, gold thread, silver-spun thread, Swarovski-sequin accessories; 180 x 340 x410 cm; 50,000 hours; Collection of Guo Pei [4]



**Fig. 3.** Blue-and-white porcelain, Guo Pei, One Thousand and Two Nights Collection China, Beijing,2010; Silk, Swarovski crystals; 190x90 x90 cm; 8,000 hours; Collection of Guo Pei [4]



**Fig. 4.** Palace Blossoms, Guo Pei, Legend of the Dragon Collection; China, Beijing,2012; Silk, jacquard, silver-spun thread, gold-spun-thread, beads, Swarovski crystals, fur, silk peonies; 190 x240 x260 cm; 10,000 hours; Collection of Guo Pei [4]



**Fig. 5.** Phoenix Seeking Her Mate, Guo Pei, Chinese Bride Collection China, Beijing,2012; Silk fabric with gold patterning in gold-spun thread, silk thread, beads; 180 x100 x100cm; 5,000 hours; Collection of Guo Pei [4]



**Fig. 6,** The Tale of the Dragon, Guo Pei, Chinese Bride Collection China, Beijing,2012; Silk fabric,Swarovski crystals, gold thread, silk thread, metal wire; 130 x100 x100 cm; 3,000 hours; Collection of Guo Pei [4]



In pieces such as 'Palace Blossoms,' (Fig. 4) 'Phoenix Seeking Her Mate,' (Fig. 5) and 'The Tale of the Dragon,' (Fig. 6) floral and auspicious beast motifs are scaled up to form high-density compositions, significantly intensifying the decorative density while relegating the garment's silhouette to a secondary role. Traditional hierarchical symbols are stripped of their institutional connotations within contemporary contexts, transformed into visually potent emblems. Decorative language evolves from 'accentuating expression' to 'structural support,' becoming pivotal elements in organizing the overall visual order.

## **2. The Generative Mechanism of Craft Narratives**

In works such as the 'Lotus-Born Noble Son Coat' and the 'Fish-Water Harmony Skirt,' (Fig. 7) embroidery techniques transcend mere pictorial representation to become material vessels for emotional and cultural symbolism. The high density of hand-embroidery heightens the perceptibility of production time and labour intensity, endowing the pieces with a ritualistic and monumental visual impact. Layers of gold thread, three-dimensional embroidered panels, and multi-layered structures create substantial textures, heightening the spatial presence of the pieces.



**Fig. 7.** Lotus-Born Noble Son Coat and the Fish-Water Harmony Skirt, Guo Pei, Chinese Bride Collection China, Beijing, 2012; Silk, gold thread; 180 x100x100 cm; 4,500 hours; Collection of Guo Pei [4]

Within the exhibition context, this intensified craftsmanship liberates the garments from utilitarian function, transforming them into narrative visual objects. Viewers perceive the cultural allegories and auspicious symbols embedded within through the tactile quality of materials and the scale of the pieces. Craftsmanship elevates from technical execution to a medium of storytelling, achieving the transformation of traditional decorative language into a contemporary expressive system through material and structural reinforcement.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In Guo Pei's work, the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional decorative language transcends mere visual appropriation. Instead, it achieves systematic reconstruction through structural reorganisation and enhanced craftsmanship. Decoration evolves from marginal visual elements into a dominant structural language, while craftsmanship transforms from technical means into a narrative medium. This elevates the garment into a comprehensive art form that embodies cultural symbolism and visual representation.

This interpretative approach demonstrates that traditional craftsmanship



possesses enduring potential for innovation within contemporary design contexts. By reorganising the structural logic of decorative language and amplifying the materiality of craftsmanship, designers can construct visually expressive systems with contemporary resonance while honouring traditional cultural resources. This offers a practical pathway for the regeneration of traditional decorative language within modern fashion design.

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## ЦЗІН Сюань

### СУЧАСНІ СТРАТЕГІЇ ІНТЕРПРЕТАЦІЇ ТРАДИЦІЙНОЇ ДЕКОРАТИВНОЇ МОВИ: ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ РУКОТВОРНИХ ОПОВІДЕЙ У ТВОРАХ ГУО ПЕЙ

Це дослідження презентує стратегії інтерпретації традиційної декоративної мови в сучасному дизайні одягу, зосереджуючись на тому, як майстерність перетворюється на наративний вираз у роботах Гуо Пей. За допомогою огляду літератури та аналізу репрезентативних творів, у поєднанні з теорією дизайнерської творчості та аналізом декоративної структури, системно розглядаються шляхи декоративної реконфігурації та вдосконалення майстерності в таких роботах, як «Золотий блиск», «Синьо-білий фарфор», «Цвітіння палацу», «Казка про дракона», «Фенікс шукає фенікса», «Плаття благородного сина, народженого лотосом» та «Спідниця гармонії риби та води». Результати дослідження показують, що шляхом реструктуризації орнаментальних рамок та посилення матеріальності майстерності Гуо Пей трансформує традиційну декоративну мову з допоміжних візуальних символів у структурні вирази з наративною функцією, досягаючи інноваційного перекладу традиційної майстерності в сучасних дизайнерських контекстах.

**Ключові слова:** традиційна декоративна мова; інтерпретація дизайну; рукотворний наратив; висока мода.