

In The Context of Social Memory: A Historical Study of the Guangxi Zhuang Brocade

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Abstract

This paper addresses the historical context of Guangxi Zhuang brocade. Research methods: This paper uses qualitative research methods to analyze the historical memory before and after the emergence of Guangxi Zhuang brocade from the perspective of social memory.

Through literature records and physical evidence, demonstrate how Guangxi Zhuang brocade appeared and developed in history and became an important symbol of social memory in Guangxi Zhuang. This paper conducts an in–depth investigation into the history of Guangxi Zhuang brocade, aiming to provide critical historical support for its future application as a world–class intangible cultural heritage. This study thereby establishes a solid academic foundation for cultural research on Guangxi Zhuang brocade.

Keywords: Guangxi Zhuang brocade; social memory; History of Zhuang brocade; Zhuang people

Introduction

Guangxi Zhuang brocade, as one of China’s four famous brocades and a vital representation of the minority nationalities’ weaving crafts, serves as a living carrier of Zhuang culture and social memory. Since the craft of Zhuang brocade in Jingxi was designated as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2006, it has become a symbolic representation of the Zhuang people. The Zhuang nationality, one of the largest minority groups in China, shares a deep connection with Zhuang brocade, which permeates various aspects of their lives, from traditional attire to festival celebrations, reflecting the cultural significance and utility of the brocade.

However, the detailed origins and historical evolution of Zhuang brocade are scarcely recorded in formal historical documents, with most of its developmental history lost over time, posing significant challenges to contemporary research (Cai & Wu, 2018).

Since the economic reforms and opening-up, Zhuang brocade has undergone a remarkable transformation in terms of its societal role and function. Transitioning from a daily utility item used by Zhuang women to a symbolic cultural icon, Zhuang brocade in modern society is not just an art form but also an important marker of cultural identity for Guangxi and the Zhuang people. This transformation has redefined its significance in contemporary contexts. However, as modernization progresses, Zhuang brocade faces a series of challenges including the discontinuity of craft transmission, changes in market demand, and shifts in cultural values, all of which threaten its future survival.

This research aims to explore how Zhuang brocade has constructed and maintained its relationship with the Zhuang people through oral histories, symbolic representations, and physical artifacts from the perspective of social memory and the history of reminiscence. By examining the social memories associated with Zhuang brocade before and after its origin, this study seeks to authenticate the historical progression of Zhuang brocade and explore effective strategies for addressing the challenges of its cultural transmission. This research not only contributes to the preservation and revitalization of this invaluable cultural heritage but also plays a crucial role in understanding and protecting the cultures of the Zhuang and other minority ethnic groups in China. Through field surveys, historical document analysis, and in-depth interactions with local artisans, this study aims to provide scientific strategies and theoretical support for the protection and development of Zhuang brocade.

Research Objectives

1. Study and analyze the “social memory” in historical documents prior to the formation of Guangxi Zhuang brocade, spanning from the Han Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty.
2. Investigate and analyze the “social memory” associated with Guangxi Zhuang brocade through oral traditions and historical documents from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty.
3. Explore and analyze the “social memory” of Guangxi Zhuang brocade among the Zhuang people from the Ming Dynasty to 2023.

Literature review

1. Overview of the History of Guangxi Zhuang Brocade:

Current research on the history of Zhuang brocade primarily revolves around two major theories. One theory suggests that Zhuang brocade originated during the Han Dynasty, supported by brocades unearthed from Han tombs at Luobowan; another view, as expressed by Tan Guosheng in his book “The Zhuang Ethnic Group,” argues that Zhuang brocade evolved from “spotted cloth” dating back to the Han Dynasty (Tan, 1984). Another hypothesis posits that Zhuang brocade originated during the Song Dynasty, based on records of “Guangxi Brocade” in the “Shu Brocade Register” (Zhuang Ethnic History Compilation Group, 1980). Although both theories on the origin of Zhuang brocade have been analyzed, they lack sufficient evidence and thus conclusions remain vague, leading to confusion in subsequent research.

Zheng Chaoxiong (Zheng, 1991) discussed the origin of Zhuang brocade in detail, criticizing the logic behind the hypothesis that it originated in the Song Dynasty based on records from the Yuan era in the “Shu Brocade Register,” which mention that every year, Chengdu was required to tribute a quantity of brocade, including “Guangxi brocade,” to the imperial court. Thus, he argued that “Guangxi Brocade” must have existed before the establishment of a brocade institute in Chengdu.

Wu Weifeng (Wu, 1995) discussed the significant impact of the development of hemp, cotton, and silk industries on the selection of materials, dyeing techniques, and jacquard technology for Zhuang brocade. He agreed with Zheng’s viewpoint and added that the differences in weaving techniques between Zhuang brocade and Shu brocade suggest that Zhuang brocade did not evolve from Shu brocade, pointing out that this view overlooks the historical foundation of textile techniques in the Zhuang regions.

Wu Weifeng (Wu, 1990) traced the tumultuous development of Zhuang brocade from the Song Dynasty to the 1990s, noting that its decline was due to its role as a tribute during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, high costs, and outdated techniques that failed to keep up with the market economy, as well as the preciousness of its materials which limited its widespread use.

Cai Hong and Wu Weifeng (Cai & Wu, 2018) co-authored “Zhuang Brocade,” analyzing its formation and development process and discussing its artistic features and cultural value. They provided a detailed portrayal of Zhuang brocade, which has significantly contributed to its preservation and development, emphasizing the importance of not only inheriting its crafting techniques but also focusing on the development of its inheritors.

Additionally, Fan Daozhi and Wan Fubin (Fan & Wan, 2018) summarized the development of Zhuang brocade in their article “A Brief History of Zhuang Brocade,” which outlined its history from the Han Dynasty to the modern era of reform and opening-up, suggesting revitalization prospects under the national policy of revitalizing traditional crafts.

These studies have traced the origins and clarified the developmental trajectory of Zhuang brocade by analyzing historical documents and delving into the production lives of the Zhuang people, providing a well-structured and persuasive foundation for future research on Zhuang brocade.

2. Review of the social memory concept

The concept of “social memory” was first used by French sociopsychologist Maurice Halbwachs. He proposed that an individual's memory is never solely personal but is formed through collective interaction within the societal framework. Halbwachs emphasized that individual memory is realized through and reflects within collective memory (Halbwachs, 2002). In the late 20th century, research on social memory expanded beyond how collective memories shape recollections to discuss how societies remember. Harald Welzer, combining ideas from Peter Burke, defined social memory as the sum of social experiences of all members of a larger community, encompassing practices such as oral traditions, conventional historical documents (e.g., memoirs, diaries), visual and photographic records, collective commemorative ceremonies, and geographic and social spaces (Welzer, 2007). Additionally, Sun Dezong highlighted that social memory evolved through stages such as mythological legends, oral memories, and symbolic representations, influenced by the advancement of productive forces, material technology levels, social interactions, cognitive abilities, and the historical development of cultural modalities (Sun & Wang, 2006). Zhuang brocade, as an important folk craft of the Zhuang people, embodies vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and diverse uses, making it a living carrier of “social memory”.

Thus, studying the origin and development of Zhuang brocade from the perspective of social memory and historical reminiscence helps correct inconsistencies in historical research and enhances or completes the history of Zhuang brocade.

Conceptual Framework

In this framework, Guangxi Zhuang brocade is central. The study explores the historical processes involving the Zhuang people both before and after the formation of Zhuang brocade. Through field research and the analysis of textual symbols, oral traditions, and physical

documents, the social memories associated with Zhuang people and Zhuang brocade are examined. This approach combines the historical contexts preceding and following the creation of Zhuang brocade, as well as the changes in its uses, to delineate the social memory of Zhuang brocade and clarify its history (Figure 1).

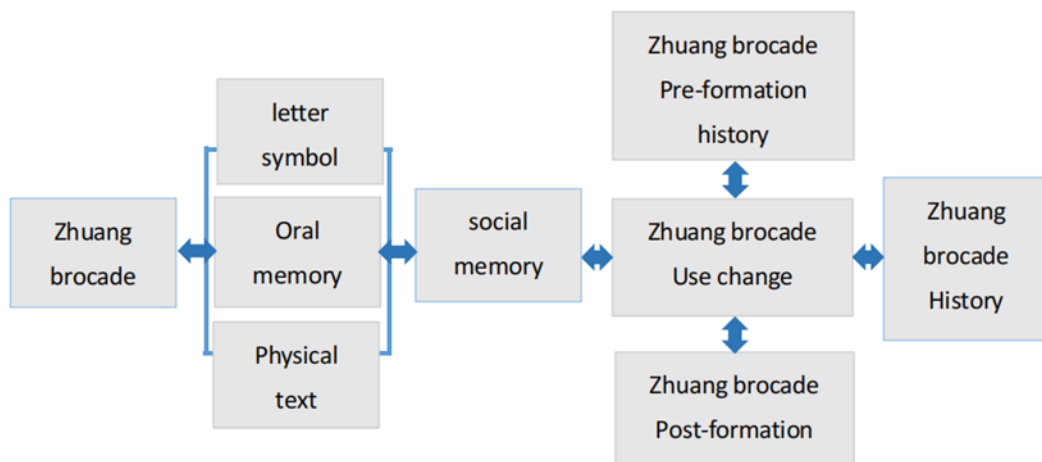


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework

(Source: Created by researchers, 2024)

Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative methods to investigate the social memories and societal relationships related to Guangxi Zhuang brocade, both pre- and post-formation. Extensive field surveys were conducted at locations such as the Jingxi Zhuang Brocade Factory, Tan Xiangguang Studio in Nanning, Binyang Zhuang Brocade Factory, and Binyang Xiangguang Workshop. Data collection included photographs, interviews, and other relevant information, involving key figures such as national and provincial inheritors of Zhuang weaving crafts, Chinese master artisans, workers from Zhuang brocade factories, and researchers specializing in Zhuang brocade. Information gathered through interviews, surveys, and observations was used to compile a detailed profile of Zhuang brocade. This data helps trace the developmental trajectory and current status of Zhuang brocade's historical social memory. Subsequent analysis focuses on the social memory of Zhuang brocade before and after its inception, culminating in a study of its historical social memory based on literary and field research materials.

Research Results

In the historical context of Guangxi weaving, “Guangxi Brocade” during the Song Dynasty played a pivotal role, linking past and future developments. It was only from the Song Dynasty onwards that textile products featuring colorful floral patterns with distinct Zhuang ethnic characteristics came to be recognized as Zhuang brocade. Zhuang brocade, as a living cultural entity, is not solely a product of culture itself but has evolved through the development of traditional weaving techniques. Thus, the study focuses on examining the emergence and evolution of Zhuang brocade based on textile records from Guangxi, both before and after its initial appearance.

Objective 1. Study and analyze the “social memory” in historical documents before the formation of Guangxi Zhuang brocade, spanning from the Han Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty.

The presence of textile technology in Guangxi can be traced back to ancient times. Excavations in the region from the late Paleolithic era have unearthed sewing tools (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Archaeology Institute, 2003), and primitive pottery wheels from the Neolithic period (Chen, 2003) indicating the existence of early textile techniques towards the end of primitive society.

During the Qin and Han periods, the region of Guangxi was mainly inhabited by the Xi'ou and Luoyue ethnic groups. After Emperor Qin Shi Huang unified Lingnan, he implemented a policy of “relocating civilians to guard the borders and intermingle with the Hundred Yue tribes”. This era saw a widespread emergence of pottery spinning wheels in Guangxi (Jiang & Wei, 1978). In early Han tombs discovered at Luobowan, artifacts such as hemp seeds and Zhou cloth were found, which substantiate the use of ramie and hemp plants as textile materials capable of producing “ge fabric, lu fabric, and zhou fabric”. Additionally, various weaving tools were unearthed at Luobowan, including reed knives, heddles, tension rods, spindle rods, warp beams, round sticks, winding boards, winding rods, and awls (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Museum, 1988). These tools were fundamentally capable of completing the textile manufacturing process.

Of particular note, a “black background with red spiral pattern brocade” found at this site serves as the earliest physical evidence of brocade history in Guangxi. This piece of brocade provides several insights: first, the report on the “Guangxi Guigang Luobowan Han Tomb” suggests that the tomb’s owner was from the Central Plains (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Museum, 1988), and the large amount of bronze ware consistent with Central Plains types found in the tomb leads some scholars to speculate that some of the items, including the brocade, might

have been products of trade from the Central Plains. Second, records in the “Cong Qi Zhi” mention the rolled cloths and textile tools found in the tomb (Figure 2), and the “black and orange spiral pattern brocade” unearthed from pit seven (Figure 3). Although some of the textile tools found resemble those used in modern Huangjiang area weaving looms or jacquard machines, indicating a transition from primitive waist weaving to inclined weaving machines from the Western Han to modern times, the unearthed textile tools have not been reconstructed to definitively determine what type of fabric or brocade could be produced. Overall, the emergence of the “black and orange spiral pattern brocade” and the wooden textile tools recorded in the “Cong Qi Zhi” (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Museum, 1988) signify that textile technology in Guangxi was already advanced by then. Moreover, the presence of this brocade confirms that the Zhuang ancestors in the region utilized brocade during the Western Han period, although it does not prove that the Zhuang ancestors had mastered the technology to produce brocade themselves.

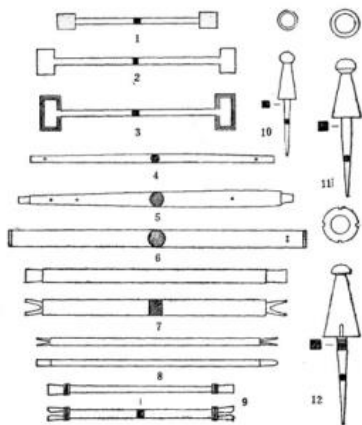


Fig.2 Line drawings of textile tools unearthed from Tomb No.1 at Luobowan

(Source: Compiled by Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Museum, Guangxi Guigang Luobowan Han Tomb, Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1988)



Fig.3 Black and orange spiral pattern brocade

(Source: Qian Xiaoping, Shen Bei, The Complete Collection of Chinese Brocades – Ethnic Brocades Edition, China Textile Publishing House, 2014)

The Tang and Song periods were crucial eras of transformation for the ethnic groups in Guangxi. From the Tang Dynasty onwards, the regional demographics shifted from the Xi'ou and Luoyue to the Liao, Li, and Hu, and by the Song Dynasty, these evolved into the Tong people. During this time, Guangxi's textile industry entered a peak development phase, producing a variety of textiles such as Gui Zhou's ramie cloth, Duoluo cloth, Rongzhou's banana and bamboo cloths, Fuzhou's spotted cloth, Binzhou's tube cloth, Guizhou's ramie cloth, Yulin's native tribute cloth, and Hezhou's banana cloth.

Simultaneously, the Central Plains underwent a significant transformation in brocade weaving techniques, influenced by Central Asian artistry and evolving from the warp-faced brocades of the Han dynasty through various stages including plain warp-faced, twill warp-faced, twill weft-faced, and eventually Tang and Liao-style damask brocades. Comparisons of Tang-style damask brocades unearthed at Famen Temple and Liao-style damask brocades from the Mogao Caves with Guangxi Zhuang brocade reveal similar rhombic grid frameworks (Zhao, 2005). Additionally, a Tang dynasty brocade with a rhombic grid filled with flowers unearthed in Astana, Turpan, featuring a dark agarwood-colored background with white variant four-leaf patterns (Zhao, 2005) (Figure 4), shows a structural resemblance to the pattern frameworks of Qing Dynasty and modern Zhuang brocades (Figures 5 and 6). Despite the lack of documentary and physical evidence of Zhuang ancestors using or producing brocade between the Western Han period and the Northern Song period documentation in the "Shu Brocade Register", the artistic and technical influences from Central Plains' Tang and Liao-style damask brocades significantly impacted the development of Zhuang brocade.



Fig.4 Diamond grid brocade Rhombic grid double-sided brocade from the Tang dynasty

(Source: Zhao Feng, A Complete History of Chinese Silk, Soochow University Press, 2005)

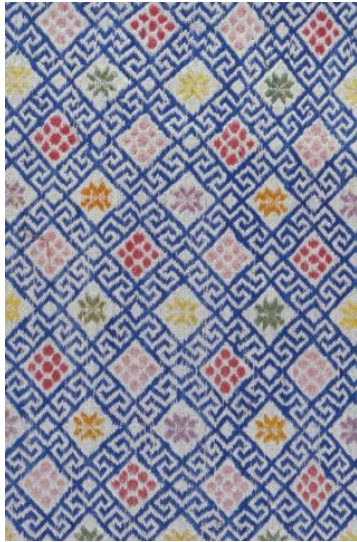


Fig.5 Qing dynasty pink square-pattern spiral brocade carpet

(Source: Collection of the Forbidden City Museum, 2024)



Fig.6 Modern “Chrysanthemum Character” pattern brocade

(Source: Photographed by researchers at Jingxi Zhuang Ethnic Museum, 2022)

Objective 2. Study and analyze the “social memory” in oral traditions and historical documents regarding Guangxi Zhuang brocade from the Ming to Qing dynasties.

2.1 Oral Traditions and Social Memory of Guangxi Zhuang Brocade

Although not formally recorded in historical documents, the origin of Guangxi Zhuang brocade is widely propagated through oral traditions among the Zhuang ethnic communities in Guangxi, forming a stable “social memory” pattern that has been transmitted across generations. Field investigations have collected many stories about the invention of Zhuang brocade, such as

“The Origin of Zhuang Brocade”, “A Piece of Zhuang Brocade”, “Hali Learns to Weave Brocade”, “Te Shooting the Rooster”, and “The Third Sister Sends a Bird Dress” (Liao & Lu, 2012). Typically, the inventors or protagonists in these stories are women, including Milo Jia, Da Wang, Fairy Lady, Bao Sang, and Qiao Ni. These stories often follow a cultural schema that starts with women being inspired by spider webs, leading to the creation and dissemination of weaving techniques. Although the details of these stories are influenced by the narrators' experiences, cultural contexts, and knowledge, they generally encompass the aforementioned elements.

For example, in “The Origin of Zhuang Brocade”, it is recounted that during the Song Dynasty, a Zhuang woman named Dani Mei, inspired by a spider web sparkling under the eaves, innovated Zhuang brocade by adapting traditional weaving techniques to mimic the web's patterns. Her brocades, celebrated for their beauty, attracted women from nearby areas who came to learn this new craft. Consequently, Zhuang brocade gradually gained popularity in Zhuang regions, with the technique being passed down among Zhuang women.

Another story recorded in the “Xincheng Mo Family Genealogy” during the Ming Dynasty details how Mo Man invented colorful Zhuang brocade. During the tenure of magistrate Mo Lu, when brocade weaving was already prevalent in Xincheng County, Mo Man, who had mastered weaving techniques from her parents, was inspired by the multicolored dew on a spider web while collecting mulberry leaves. Back home, she innovated a multicolored brocade using colorful threads as the weft and plain fine yarn as the warp, and later designed patterns like lions playing with balls, phoenixes threading through peonies, and dragons playing with pearls. Her brocades became highly sought after, prompting traders to visit and place orders. Mo Lu's wife, upon learning of Mo Man's abilities, invited her to teach the technique at the magistrate's office, where Mo Man generously shared her knowledge not just there but with other locals as well. Consequently, Xincheng's brocade became renowned, significantly expanding its production scale.

These narratives illustrate how, from oral tradition to recorded documents, the development of Zhuang brocade marks a significant aesthetic evolution in the Zhuang community from single or multicolored fabrics to intricate designs, culminating in the distinct artistic patterns tailored to the aesthetic needs of the Zhuang people, solidifying into a stable cultural schema of Zhuang brocade's origin and innovation over time.

2.2 Social Memory in Historical Documents of Guangxi Zhuang Brocade Patterns

Guangxi Zhuang brocade has many patterns, basically classified into four categories, generally classified into four major categories: geometric, floral, animal, and script motifs. These patterns are influenced by the weaving methods of Zhuang brocade, which typically incorporate a combination of geometric shapes and planar forms. Following the Southern Song Dynasty, Guangxi textiles, under the dual influence of local wisdom and Central Plains culture, transitioned from monochromatic to multicolored, and from plain to patterned fabrics, entering a phase of ethnic exploration and development.

For example, during the Southern Song period, Fan Chengda noted in “Guihai Yuheng Zhi” that textiles from “Two River State” mimicked the patterns of brocades but were far simpler in their production techniques. These textiles included “tan”, similar to Chinese thread gauze with small square patterns, and “lian zi”, roughly like ramie but with patterns referred to as “flowered lian”. These were highly valued by the locals (Cheng, 1984). Zhou Qufei in “Lingwai Daida” recorded that in Yongzhou, the local Miao people wove white tan with square patterns, thick and beautiful, considered superior clothing in the south (Zhou, 1999). These patterns of geometric designs continued in the textile practices of the Two River State people, highlighting a significant aspect of their aesthetic localization process.

Moreover, on Hainan Island along the southern route of Guangnan West Road, the Li people engaged in a unique form of textile production. They purchased Chinese brocade colors, extracted the silk threads, and combined them with kapok to weave Li curtains, a testament to their adaptive use of Central Plains’ silk to meet their aesthetic needs. In another instance, although “tan” shared a resemblance with Central Plains’ gauze in form and was cherished for its texture, it represented an experimental phase preceding the actual development of Zhuang brocade, as it did not possess the multicolored properties typical of later Zhuang brocade.

These historical accounts depict how geometric patterns became a foundational element of Zhuang aesthetics by the Southern Song dynasty. Over time, as Zhuang brocade styles evolved during the Ming and Qing dynasties with the development of “native brocade”, these textiles underwent a rapid transformation, gradually embodying a distinctively ethnic style. This evolution of Zhuang brocade’s patterns reflects a deep integration of traditional motifs with the evolving cultural and artistic expressions of the Zhuang people, ultimately leading to the richly patterned and culturally significant Zhuang brocade known today.

Objective 3. Study and analyze the “social memory” of Guangxi Zhuang brocade among the Zhuang people from the Ming dynasty to 2023.

3.1 Memory of Royal Tribute

During the Ming and Qing periods, Guangxi continued and perfected the Tusi system from the Yuan dynasty, leading to robust development. The predecessor of Zhuang brocade, known as “native brocade”, officially entered the historical stage during this time. As noted in the “Xincheng Mo Family Genealogy”, during the Hongzhi era (1488–1505) of the Ming dynasty, the third Tusi, Mo Lu, proposed in “Guan Zhen Zai Xun” that “brocade could be systematically learned”; during the Jiajing era (1522–1566), the wife of the tenth Tusi, Mo Zongzhao, mentioned, “No need for fancy silks, just diligent weaving”; during the Tianqi era (1621–1627), the wife of the eleventh Tusi, Mo Enda, took on the weaving labor herself; the wives of the twelfth Tusi, Mo Meng, and the thirteenth Tusi, Mo Zongzhao, sold brocades, ensuring that “even the smallest servant in the household didn't cost a penny all year” (Pan, 2012). Throughout the Ming and Qing periods, successive Tusi encouraged and promoted brocade production, making it a significant part of Guangxi's household workshops. The techniques of brocade weaving became increasingly refined, and the scale of production expanded. Additionally, during the Shunzhi era of the Qing dynasty, the twelfth Tusi of Xincheng, Mo Meng, selected exquisite brocade patterns such as “Dragon and Phoenix Playing with Pearls” and “Lion Rolling Balls” as tribute items. According to the “Qingyuan Fu Zhi” from the eighth year of the Daoguang era, Xincheng County annually supplied four types of brocade, totaling twenty pieces, decorated with forty–six taels and one qian of silver, which were submitted to the government through the salt administration. Thus, offering brocade as tribute became a regular practice. The earliest known tribute brocades, such as the camel-colored brocade with diagonal Wan flower patterns from the Qianlong period (Figure 7), deep brown geometric pattern brocade, and pink square pattern brocade, are preserved in the Palace Museum. Through the relentless efforts of generations of Tusi and brocade artisans, Zhuang brocade evolved from a local textile to a tribute item, accelerating its ethnic integration and becoming a living fossil of Zhuang social memory.

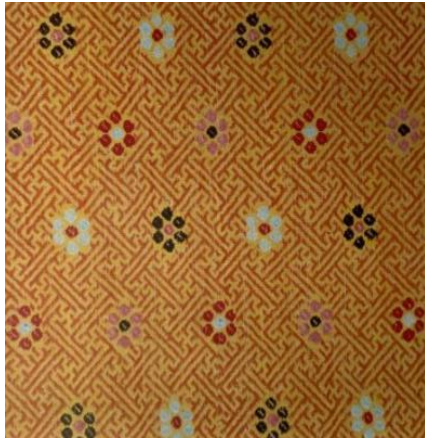


Fig.7 Qing Dynasty Brocade with Wan Flower Pattern

(Source: Palace Museum Collection, 2024)

3.2 Ritual Gifts Memory

After becoming a tribute item, Zhuang brocade rapidly spread among the populace, integrating swiftly into the lives of the Zhuang people through its association with traditional ceremonial events. In ceremonies such as the full moon and wedding rituals, Zhuang brocade serves as a crucial link within familial and romantic relationships, not only symbolizing the aspirations of the Zhuang people for love and a better life but also forming an essential part of their collective memory and a key to their pursuit of happiness.

In the full moon ceremony, the Zhuang brocade baby carrier is the most significant symbol, usually presented by the maternal grandmother leading a group of ten to thirty people. The son-in-law's family hosts a banquet, and during this event, a formal presentation of the baby carrier takes place, accompanied by singers from both sides performing the “Baby Carrier Song” to bless the child with happiness and safety. In locations such as Liucheng and Jingxi, there is also a tradition for the full moon: on the morning of the full moon, a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl dresses in new clothes and carries the baby in a new carrier to walk through the town. Before leaving the house, an elder gives the girl an umbrella and places a few pages of books and a sheet of white paper in the baby's embrace to ensure the child grows up brave, literate, and sensible (Qin, 1995). Additionally, the longstanding belief in the Flower Mother goddess in Zhuang folklore, where every child, regardless of gender, is considered a flower sprouted by the goddess and thus protected by her, enriches this tradition (Chen, 2008). According to the “Annals of South Yue” by Li Diaoyuan (Liao, 2002), there is a mention of “boys as white flowers, girls as red flowers”, and the chrysanthemum pattern on the carriers is dedicated to the fertility goddess Miluo Jia. The full moon ceremony is thus a vital cultural and familial milestone for Zhuang

children, where Zhuang brocade not only reinforces familial bonds but also carries the weight of their cultural beliefs and values (Figure 8).



Fig.8 Zhuang Traditional back strap

(Source: Tian Yaocheng, shot in Jingxi National Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition Hall, 2022)

Starting from the Qing Dynasty, Zhuang brocade became an essential part of a woman's dowry in Zhuang weddings. As Yan Sihui wrote in the 25th year of Guangxu's reign in the "Guishun Zhili Prefecture Annals": "In the dowry, brocade quilts are indispensable". The "Customs" section in the Republic of China's "Jingxi County Annals" states: "The groom's family offers betrothal gifts, typically including bride price, pigs, sheep, geese, ducks, chicken, seafood, and sweets. The bride's dowry includes brocade quilts, blankets, curtains, shoes, socks, boxes, pots, and bowls". The newly compiled "Jingxi County Annals" mentions in the "Marriage Customs" section: "The bride's dowry must include Zhuang brocade quilts, blankets, mosquito nets, curtains, furniture, and kitchen utensils, with the quantity depending on the bride price" (compiled by the Jingxi County Annals Compilation Committee, 2000). From the Qing Dynasty to the 1980s, Zhuang brocade became a crucial social medium in wedding ceremonies. Through the exquisite Zhuang brocade, the wisdom, skill, and character of Zhuang women were showcased.

Moreover, in Zhuang society, a woman's proficiency in handwoven textiles was a significant measure of her capabilities. During festivals, market days, visits to relatives, or participation in weddings, young women often wore clothing adorned with fine Zhuang brocade or carried brocade-embroidered bags to demonstrate their craftsmanship, attracting admiration and pursuit from young men. As recalled by Huang Yueping, a brocade master in Jingxi, in 2009: "In the past, a Zhuang brocade quilt was a must for a wedding. It was our custom... If a bride had a Zhuang brocade quilt as part of her dowry, both her family and her in-laws would be proud... If she didn't, people would gossip and look down on her for a long time" (Ning, 2010).

Thus, Zhuang brocade became a reflection of a Zhuang woman's intelligence, kindness, and industriousness, symbolizing love and romance (Figure 9).



Fig.9 Groom Huang Guozhu and bride Lu Xiaofang held a traditional wedding ceremony

(Source: Guangxi News Network, photo taken by Fan Shaoguang, 2023)

3.3 Commercitized memory

Throughout the history of Guangxi, textiles have always been important commodities, with brocade particularly valued as “an inch of brocade is worth an inch of gold”, indicating its high value. The “Guangxi Brocade” became an essential trade item during the Southern Song dynasty, marking the beginning of the commercial exchange era for Guangxi brocade. The driving force behind the widespread acceptance of Guangxi brocade among the Zhuang people was its commercial value, which led to the establishment of household workshop production models. As described by Mo Zhen in his poem “Xincheng Bamboo Branches”, “In July, the mountain town's lights shine bright, every household weaves brocade till the third watch”, illustrating the bustling brocade weaving scene in Xincheng at the time. The Ming dynasty's “Guishun Zhili Prefecture Annals” records: “Native brocade, woven with silk and cotton, vividly colorful, lush and varied, just like the sea map and waves in Du Fu's poems, the heaven's phoenix and dragon. The brocade woven in this area is relatively thick”. This description aligns with the materials, colors, and quality of modern Zhuang brocade. The “Qingyuan Fu Zhi” mentions: “Xincheng County annually provides four types of native brocade, totaling twenty pieces, decorated with forty–six taels and one qian of silver, submitted through the salt administration”. For tribute production, in addition to using silk and cotton, silver threads were used to enhance the brocade's elegance, meeting the requirements for tribute items.

During the Qing dynasty, in addition to being a tribute, Zhuang brocade began to be widely used among the populace, becoming a valuable textile for the Zhuang people. The “Guangxi General Annals”, edited by Jin Hong and others, records: “Zhuang brocade is produced

in various prefectures and counties. The Zhuang people love colors, and all items like clothes, skirts, scarves, and quilts are woven with five-colored velvet, creating floral and bird patterns in woven fabrics. Seen from afar, it appears skillful and dazzling, but up close, it is coarse. The Zhuang people treasure it.” Yan Sihui wrote in the “Guishun Zhili Prefecture Annals”: “In dowries, brocade quilts are indispensable, as everyone in the local area can weave them. The brocade is made of willow velvet, colored in five shades, thick and durable, valued at five taels. Girls learn to weave before reaching adulthood.” As Zhuang brocade became a crucial part of dowries, its value increased. Shen Rilín’s “Miscellaneous Records of Western Guangdong” describes Zhuang women as having “excellent skills, dyeing silk and weaving colorful brocade, comparable to satin, suitable for mattresses. High officials and wealthy merchants compete to buy it.” As the craftsmanship of folk Zhuang brocade continued to develop, it began to enter the foreign trade market, resulting in a scene where high officials and wealthy merchants competed to purchase it. Thus, integrating the cultural model of “social memory” formed by Zhuang brocade in historical processes, it can be deduced that after “Guangxi Brocade” appeared in the Southern Song dynasty’s trade, brocade weaving technology began to spread widely in the Zhuang areas of Guangxi. With the promotion by Tusi during the Ming dynasty, Zhuang brocade — initially Zhuang weaving — began to take shape and developed throughout the Ming and Qing periods, ultimately becoming the Zhuang people’s “happiness code”, “symbol of love”, “wedding emblem”, and “familial bond”. As the classic verses from the Zhuang opera “Zhuang Brocade” sing:

“Zhuang brocade is the spring planting and autumn harvest of the Zhuang people,
Zhuang brocade is the vast sky and earth of the Zhuang family,
Zhuang brocade is the heart-woven wish of mothers,
Zhuang brocade is the source of happiness pursued by children.”

Conclusion

1. By analyzing the use of textiles and brocade before the birth of Zhuang brocade in Guangxi, there is strong evidence of the use of brocade in the Western Han period. However, there is no proof that the Zhuang ancestors themselves wove the brocade, as there are no corresponding people or weaving tools identified. Therefore, this cannot be considered strong evidence for the birth of Zhuang brocade. It is hoped that in the future, the textile tools unearthed from the Luobowan Han tomb can be restored to further analyze whether the Zhuang ancestors mastered brocade weaving technology.

2. Through new knowledge gained from oral traditions and historical documents after the birth of Zhuang brocade, it is evident that the brocade weaving in Guangxi was influenced by the techniques and artistic forms of the Tang and Liao dynasty brocades from the Central Plains. The “Guangxi Brocade” in the Song dynasty was a critical transitional period for the formation of Zhuang brocade. During the Ming and Qing periods, under the influence of the Tusi system and Zhuang culture, modern Zhuang brocade was formed, with its basic form taking shape in the early Ming dynasty and reaching its peak development during the Ming and Qing periods.

3. After its formation in the Ming dynasty, the development of Guangxi Zhuang brocade was closely related to the socio-cultural environment of the Zhuang people. Its uses established close ties with the Zhuang people, becoming deeply rooted in Zhuang customs and symbolizing their identity. Through royal tributes, ceremonial gifts, and commercialization, Zhuang brocade retained its significance in the collective and social memory of the Zhuang people, constructing various values and meanings.

Suggestions

1. From the perspective of relevant government departments, this study, which integrates data on the historical development of Zhuang brocade obtained through field investigations with research in anthropology, sociology, and art, suggests that this research can serve as a reference for the government in formulating policies and measures for the development, promotion, and support of Zhuang brocade. It is recommended to increase research efforts in the protection of Zhuang brocade as an intangible cultural heritage, using cross-disciplinary cooperation and collaboration to advance the Guangxi Zhuang brocade intangible cultural heritage project to the level of world-class intangible cultural heritage protection.

2. The government, combined with urban development and market needs, in the background of urban development and market demand, build new folk rituals and consumption power to promote the development of Zhuang brocade. It is suggested to enhance the ceremonial aspect of Zhuang brocade intangible cultural heritage activities, integrate modern urban culture, create new activity spaces for Zhuang brocade, and endow it with new folk significance.

3. It is hoped that the research content of this paper can contribute to the protection and inheritance of Guangxi Zhuang brocade intangible cultural heritage and assist in strengthening the sense of unity of the Chinese nation. Meanwhile, it is suggested to promote and experience

Zhuang brocade techniques, open Zhuang brocade technique training classes, attract talents interested in learning Zhuang brocade art, and provide training opportunities.

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