

From Woodblock to Textile: Imagery of Elite Culture in the Blue-and-White Embroideries of Sichuan

Catherine Paganì

Volume 24, numéro 1, 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071703ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071703ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Paganì, C. (1997). From Woodblock to Textile: Imagery of Elite Culture in the Blue-and-White Embroideries of Sichuan. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 24(1), 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071703ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cette étude utilise les broderies distinctives en bleu et blanc sur coton de la province du Sichuan pour analyser les rapports entre la culture des élites et celle des classes rurales de la Chine. Produits par les femmes pour un usage familial, entre le milieu du dix-neuvième et le début du vingtième siècle, ces textiles révèlent une aussi riche tradition artistique que celle des classes éduquées et de nombreux motifs trouvés sur ces broderies populaires sont issus de la culture des élites. On étudiera la transposition des idées et des images d'une classe à l'autre en examinant les rapports entre les illustrations de livres pour l'élite et les broderies populaires par l'intermédiaire d'un bois gravé : « Image du Nouvel An » (*nianhua*) qui faisait partie de la tradition artistique des deux classes. Les images les plus intéressantes sont celles de bon augure, et plus particulièrement celles représentant des plantes dans un vase ancien figurant parmi les possessions d'un érudit. Ces dernières sont les plus suggestives de la culture des classes supérieures et apparaissent très fréquemment dans le répertoire des motifs des broderies populaires. Loin d'être de simples copies serviles d'illustrations de livre, elle mettent en évidence le talent artistique de leurs créatrices et demeurent des preuves tangibles des échanges entre les sphères cultivées et communes.

From Woodblock to Textile: Imagery of Elite Culture in the Blue-and-White Embroideries of Sichuan

CATHERINE PAGANI, THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Résumé

Cette étude utilise les broderies distinctives en bleu et blanc sur coton de la province du Sichuan pour analyser les rapports entre la culture des élites et celle des classes rurales de la Chine. Produits par les femmes pour un usage familial, entre le milieu du dix-neuvième et le début du vingtième siècle, ces textiles révèlent une aussi riche tradition artistique que celle des classes éduquées et de nombreux motifs trouvés sur ces broderies populaires sont issus de la culture des élites. On étudiera la transposition des idées et des images d'une classe à l'autre en examinant les rapports entre les illustrations de livres pour l'élite et les broderies populaires par l'intermédiaire d'un bois gravé : « Image du Nouvel An » (*nianhua*)

qui faisait partie de la tradition artistique des deux classes. Les images les plus intéressantes sont celles de bon augure, et plus particulièrement celles représentant des plantes dans un vase ancien figurant parmi les possessions d'un érudit. Ces dernières sont les plus suggestives de la culture des classes supérieures et apparaissent très fréquemment dans le répertoire des motifs des broderies populaires. Loin d'être de simples copies serviles d'illustrations de livre, elle mettent en évidence le talent artistique de leurs créatrices et demeurent des preuves tangibles des échanges entre les sphères cultivées et communes.

Links in verbal communication between the elite and rural populations of early twentieth-century China has been the subject of a number of recent scholarly studies.¹ Language, comprising oral and literary modes, is considered to be of “critical importance” in the transmission of elements of culture. Examination of the network of communication between the upper and lower classes is essential in understanding not only the dissemination of ideas but also “what the great mass of Chinese who were not part of the national elite thought and felt about themselves and the world around them.”²

While valuable, however, verbal sources have inherent limitations. The diverse regional and ethnic variations in dialect formed barriers to communication within the oral realm; and although the written language was unified among all groups, and throughout China people could read and write, among the rural non-elite populations those who could be considered literate formed only a small percentage.³ For this large and diverse group, the barriers to communication could thus be enormous, further hindering both the transmission of ideas between elite and rural spheres and our overall understanding of this process.

Fortunately, an understanding of the rural world of beliefs and values, folktales and legends, is also accessible through non-language sources. Objects, too, carry meaning and, when used in conjunction with available texts, can provide a more complete picture of a given society. For the largely non-literate rural populations of China, objects are of central importance: made for and used by this group, they become the primary documents of rural culture, transcending the limitations of language.

Of all art forms, textiles are perhaps best representative of culture, as they are inextricably linked to the social, economic, technological and artistic climate of the period. Textiles also had to serve the dual purpose of beauty and practicality: not only

were they used to decorate their surroundings, but they had to be utilitarian as well. This was especially true in rural culture in which little could be frivolous and where textiles more than any other artistic media had to find the balance between the ornamental and the functional. In addition, embroidered textiles were one of few creative outlets available to rural non-elite women, and thus they may serve as documents of the artistic and creative abilities of this largely ignored segment of the population.

This study makes use of the distinctive blue-and-white cotton embroideries of rural Sichuan province in southwestern China to examine cultural transmission of ideas and images between elite and non-elite, rural society in China. These textiles are made of a white plain-weave cotton embroidered predominantly in cross-stitch in an indigo-dyed cotton thread and were used primarily as bed covers and valances, table covers and children's clothing. They date from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries and come from the region of the provincial capital of Chengdu, and the towns of Renshou and Pengxian, both of which are within an eighty-kilometre radius of Chengdu.⁴ Many of the themes depicted on these folk embroideries are connected to elite culture. In its examination of communication between classes, this study focuses on the relationship between woodblock-printed illustrations of the educated elite and the folk embroideries of rural Sichuan through their intermediary, the woodblock-printed “New Year picture,” or *nianhua*, all of which share thematic and stylistic similarities. Because of a lack of contemporary written sources on these textiles, they themselves will serve as important purveyors of information and through their subject matter and composition may yield insight into this little-studied segment of Chinese society.

As they were largely ignored by the Chinese themselves, much of what we know of these textiles comes from the writings of Westerners who found themselves in these rural areas in the first half of the twentieth century. Anthropologist Carl Schuster's focused efforts to study the rural populations of southwestern China in the 1930s has left the largest legacy: the 1,500 so-called "peasant embroideries" he acquired now form a substantial portion of the extant material culture.⁵ In addition, the efforts of Protestant medical and dental missionaries have also contributed to the body of material available for study. At the centre of this research are the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, and the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, both of which exist as a result of the Canadian missionary presence in southwestern China. These missionaries, far from being scholars or specialists in art or anthropology, collected items they found interesting, purchasing pieces from the women who made them or from the itinerant antiques dealers, the *mai gudongdi*, who would travel from home to home selling their wares. When a customer showed interest in one particular type of good, the dealers would specifically bring these for subsequent visits.⁶

The missionaries not only acquired pieces; they wrote about them as well, although these references were usually indirect, such as a passing mention in a larger essay on social life or customs.⁷ In some cases, however, the writer was so taken by the charm of the textiles that they were given special attention. These personal jottings, the majority of which are unpublished, form a large proportion of the primary source material available on this subject. As the producers and consumers of this work were largely illiterate, they were unable to leave a written record, and as rural craft did not attract the attention of the literate class, they, too, neither wrote about nor collected it. Furthermore, because cross-stitch was a technique employed largely by the non-elite population of China, it has been overlooked by most mainstream studies on Chinese embroidery, being mentioned only in connection with "peasant" work.⁸ For these reasons, these textiles have not received serious attention by scholars both in China and abroad. Evidence of this neglect may be found in the lengthy survey of stitches entitled "Embroidery Techniques in Old China" by the eminent scholar of Chinese textiles, Schuyler Cammann, who not only excludes cotton but also fails to mention cross-stitch as being used in China at all.⁹ Anna Granger's 1938 article for *Natural History*, based on pieces she acquired while in China in the 1920s with her scientist-husband, Dr Walter Granger, was entitled, "Rescuing a Little-Known Chinese Art – How an Explorer's Wife 'Discovered' a Fascinating Style of Peasant Embroidery in Far Western China, and Helped to Save it from Oblivion."¹⁰ These sentiments are confirmed in the catalogue records of both the

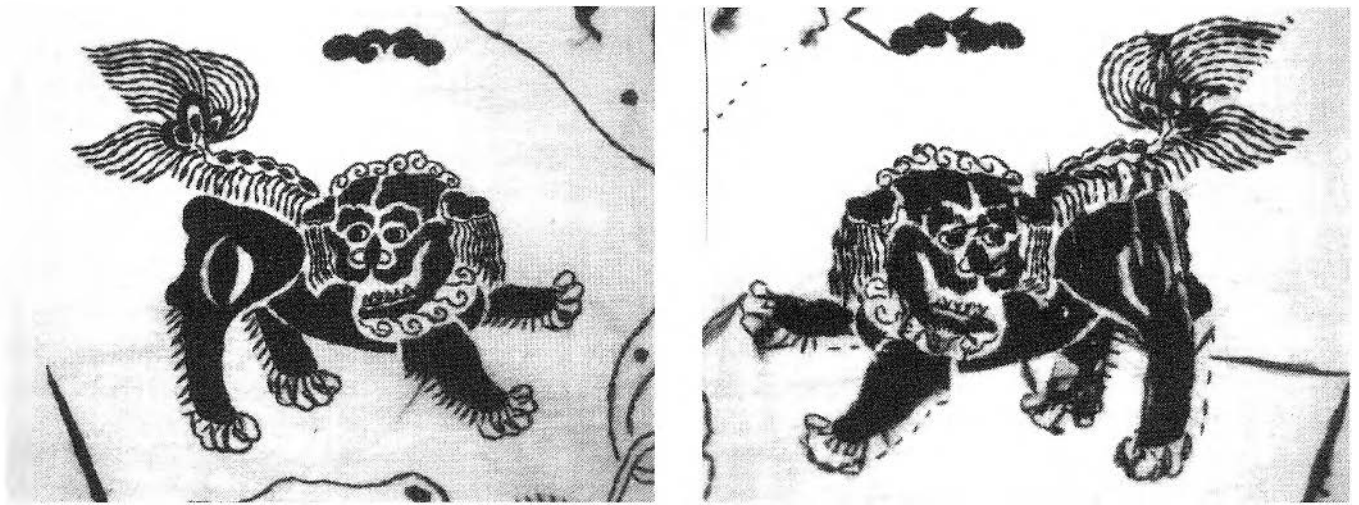
Royal Ontario Museum and the Museum of Anthropology where the blue-and-white embroideries were described as "worthless" and of "no commercial value" at the time they were acquired in China.

Relatively few examples of this work are extant today. Textiles, as opposed to other objects, have inherent problems in terms of longevity. Natural fibres such as cotton degrade easily and cannot withstand the ravages of time. Hand-woven and hand-embroidered fabrics were time-consuming to produce, and therefore tended to be used until they were worn out, remade into another item, or cut up and used as patches. Furthermore, the modernization of the textile industry in the twentieth century and the popularity of cheap imported printed cloth which was considered more fashionable contributed to the decline in the skills needed to produce hand embroidery.

The decorative motifs of the embroideries show striking similarity with other folk art forms such as papercuts. In fact, papercuts were considered one of the necessities of the embroiderer, as some of these designs served as patterns.¹¹ Cut first with a knife or scissors, the paper pattern was placed on the underside of the fabric and then stitched over completely. In addition to papercuts, books of embroidery patterns were also available. Samuel Wells Williams' mid-nineteenth-century observations on the production of silk embroidery in Guangzhou mention that, "Books are prepared for the use of embroiderers, containing patterns for them to imitate."¹² Not surprisingly, because these books were used to trace patterns or were themselves cut and applied to the fabric, few examples of such works are extant today. One rare example is the little-known mid-seventeenth-century work, *Jianxiaji* [*A Collection of Scattered Red Clouds*] by Shen Linqi (1603–64) for which sixteen of a probable eighteen leaves exist. The majority of the work's detailed embroidery designs illustrate popular tales based on folk art traditions.¹³ Another rare surviving work is Ren Songqiao's *Cixiu fanben* [*An Embroidery Pattern-Book*] of 1934–35.¹⁴ This compilation of folk designs includes birds and flowers, auspicious motifs, and two images curiously entitled "Sweet Dream." Fragmentary remains of a paper pattern appear on the underside of an embroidered bed cover and are largely covered by stitches (figs. 1a and b).

The majority of pieces were made for the bed, the central piece of furniture in the rural household. Enclosed on three sides, the bed's exposed side showcased the finely worked embroideries of the home: the bed covers were made of four long panels of cotton sewn together along their long edges, with one panel hanging over the side of the bed, and an embroidered valance made from a single long strip of cotton hung from the canopy above. The valances and side panels of the bed have designs which follow a general pattern of five large main motifs,

Figure 1a and b. Lion dog, with remains of paper pattern on underside. Front and back detail of a bed cover. Cotton cross-stitch embroidery on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, EDZ 1518 (Photo: author).



often in the form of roundels or squares, which encompassed a wide variety of subject matter. Smaller secondary motifs and border patterns along the lower edge finished the piece.

Among the embroideries, the main designs may be classified according to three broad themes: auspicious messages, which include flowers, fruits and other images that carry symbolic meanings for good fortune; genre scenes of daily life, including festivities both public and private, such as the annual dragon boat festival and wedding processions; and literary subjects which take their imagery from folk tales, legends, myths and regional operas. Landscape scenes are rarely found in the main pictorial register but tend rather to constitute border designs. In addition, images of birds, flowers, butterflies and animals appear in the embroideries, both as single secondary motifs and as component parts of more elaborate symbolic images.

Auspicious designs comprise the largest group of motifs on the textiles and are of primary interest in this study. These images are related to wishes for wealth, long life, happiness, fertility and the hope for a career in the bureaucracy – desires not limited to rural society but found throughout Chinese culture. Some have their origins in legend and superstition while others are rebuses, or puns, on the Chinese language. The word for child, *zi*, for example, has the same pronunciation as that for seed, and thus fruits and flowers with many seeds, such as the pomegranate and the lotus, are popular symbolic images of the wish for many children, a desire felt across Chinese culture. Combinations of plants are often used, with some images depicting a child emerging from an opened lotus flower or pomegranate.

In addition to motifs representing the desire for many children are images which depict the hope for academic success in the life of the sons of the family. The desire for male children

was stronger than that for females, for when a son was born, it was known as *daxi*, or great happiness.¹⁵ With the birth of a son came the strong wish that he attain a posting in the official bureaucracy. In theory, education was open to all, and thus even a farmer from rural China, with the proper training, could write the imperial examinations. Success brought honour to the candidate and his family and ensured a lifetime of prestigious employment in the civil service. Thus, it is not surprising to find that many of the textiles are embroidered with motifs representing the wish to have many sons who would successfully pass the exams to become an official. The image of a boy astride a mythical beast known as the *qilin* and carrying a lotus bloom and a musical instrument known as a *sheng* is an elaborate pun which suggests that the family be blessed with many sons who will be awarded positions in government (fig. 2).¹⁶ For those who had entered the bureaucracy, official status was signified by an embroidered badge of rank worn on the clothing, known as a “mandarin square” (fig. 3a). The mother of one aspiring bureaucrat in rural Sichuan has cleverly embroidered her son’s jacket with her interpretation of a mandarin square, featuring two cavorting phoenixes (fig. 3b).

These motifs are overt symbolic depictions of the hope for a literati lifestyle, however unlikely this outcome may have been. There are also messages which imply the same sentiments in a much more indirect manner, however, and represent themes suggestive of elite culture. Predominant among such designs are images of vases containing auspicious flowers in which combinations of wishes are offered through the symbolism of various flora, presented as well through the vase, *ping*, a pun on *ping’an*, meaning peace. Along with their symbolic auspicious messages for scholarly success, vases also had a strong decorative appeal. They were commonly shown accompanied by objects from the

Figure 2. Boy astride a *qilin*. Detail of a bed valance. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. 182.5 x 37.3 cm. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 1000/2 (Photo: author).



Figure 3a. Chinese badge of rank ("mandarin square"). Embroidered silk. Late nineteenth century. 30.6 x 30 cm. Royal Ontario Museum 950.100.264 a–b (Photo: ROM).



scholar's desk: musical instruments, books and *ruyi* sceptres (S-shaped objects whose name means "as you wish," they were often given as gifts suggesting good wishes for the recipient on behalf of the giver). Such items were not a part of a rural non-elite life, yet a great many of these images are found among the rural Sichuanese embroideries. What were the sources of these designs, and why were they adopted into the rural repertoire of motifs? More importantly, what can the presence of motifs relating to elite culture reveal about the nature of communication between social strata? The examination of these issues suggests that the communication between classes of Chinese society goes beyond the verbal realm, and that non-language or visual sources play a crucial role in this process.

Contact between elite and non-elite society increased in the Qing period (1644–1911). An economic expansion which had begun in the Song dynasty intensified, creating increased opportunities for wealth which resulted in demographic increases and changes in social differentiation and mobility.¹⁷ This was particularly true in the eighteenth century when urbanization and commercialization led to interregional trade, a growth in the overall population, and a migration from urban centres into less-populated regions. The rising upwardly mobile merchant and landlord class redefined the elite which previously had consisted of the literati alone. Owing to the increased purchasing power of these nouveaux riches, the outward aspects of elite status were now made available to them. This allowed the merchant class that dominated urban culture, for example, to imitate aspects of an elite lifestyle without having the distinc-

Figure 3b. Child's jacket. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. 62 x 39 cm. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, EDZ 1319 (Photo: author).



tion of being a scholar or having a career as a high-ranking official.

Interregional trade and the profitability of commercialized agriculture drew urban dwellers away from the cities and into the rural areas. Sojourning merchants and lower-level officials posted to these regions carried with them the cultural practices of the elite. Whether a member of the literati or a merchant emulating a literati lifestyle, those who lived in smaller rural communities did not live in complete isolation from the non-

elites. Rural society thus became more heterogeneous and had increased interaction with elite culture.

In this environment, the rural poor were introduced to the accoutrements of the elite. Domestic servants who worked in the inner quarters of elite homes, such as the women who served as wet-nurses and maids, would be exposed to the collections of porcelains, enamels and silks, all embellished with auspicious imagery. While such close contact between social strata was on a relatively small scale, it served both to acquaint the non-elite with elite motifs and to sensitize them to aspects of literati life; most importantly, it helped to create an atmosphere that facilitated the transmission of aspects of culture between the classes.

Large-scale transposition of ideas from the educated elite to the largely illiterate mass population was accomplished through a number of media, such as regional theatre and opera, ballads, storytelling and novels. These forms of communication, however, were hindered by a number of factors, including differences in regional dialect and a largely illiterate population. Non-verbal sources, though, could transcend the barriers of the oral or written word and were not dependent on language to transmit their messages effectively. One such medium was the woodblock-printed picture which could be found in two general forms: illustrated books and New Year pictures (*nianhua*). While the books – encyclopedias, almanacs, novels and painting manuals – were targeted at the scholarly elite, New Year pictures had mass appeal through their wide range of subject matter. The literacy level of the viewer was unimportant, as the images themselves were the message. As dialect was irrelevant in understanding these prints, ideas could be transported between regions, further contributing to the sharing of values and ideas across Chinese culture. As well, the relative ease with which woodblock prints could be mass-produced increased the rate and range of dissemination. Used by both the elite and non-elite Chinese, these New Year pictures thus served as a point of intersection between high and low cultures.

The earliest extant woodblock-printed book illustration in China is the *Diamond Sutra*, printed by Wang Jie in the ninth year of Xiantong (868) and found at Dunhuang in 1907.¹⁸ By the Song dynasty (960–1279), the use of woodblock printing for books increased, and in many cases, illustrations were set with the text. It was not until the late sixteenth century that woodblock printing underwent rapid development owing to the increased demand for literature, especially fiction. Consequently, the accompanying illustrations became finer and more elegant as artists, rather than craftsmen-carvers, designed the compositions. Another important development of the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was the advent of colour printing using multiple blocks, first found in the *Chengshi moyuan* [*Mr Cheng's Ink Album*] of 1606 which was printed using five colours.¹⁹

Because these prints were so labour-intensive to create, particular attention was paid to each stage in their production, resulting in prints that are of very high quality overall. It was at this time that painting manuals made an appearance in which the images of paintings by artists were of primary interest. The finely detailed woodblock printing of the Ming waned in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911); only a few works of the eighteenth century, namely painting manuals and works of literature, rivalled those of the previous dynasty. The influence from the West in the nineteenth century signalled the decline of woodblock printing in China; from this time many books were published using lithography.

Until the end of the Ming dynasty, woodblock-printed illustrations were used primarily for books, but at that time they were increasingly employed in the production of popular New Year pictures, or *nianhua*, which were an inexpensive and colourful way to decorate homes during the New Year.²⁰ The origin of *nianhua* dates back perhaps as far as the Qin (221–206 BC) and Han (206 BC–AD 220) dynasties when protective deities were painted on gates and doors. By the Tang dynasty (618–907), two guardian generals were used; and in the Song dynasty, the paired military and civil officials painted on the gates served not only to ward off evil spirits but to welcome auspiciousness, as well. The demand for these portraits grew as woodblock printing grew; soon these prints adorned the interiors of homes, and with them came the idea of hanging prints to celebrate the New Year. The appearance of the first woodblock New Year picture is unknown, but evidence suggests a twelfth-century date. The *Dongjing menghuaji* [*Dream of the Splendours of the Eastern Capital*] by Meng Yuanlao of 1147 mentions the wide variety of *zhibhua* [paper pictures] which were offered for sale in the marketplace of Bianjing [Kaifeng] close to the New Year.²¹ By the thirteenth century, many types of prints were available as noted by Zhou Mi (1232–98) in his *Wulin jiushi* [*Past Events in Hangzhou*]:

In the capital, commencing from the tenth month, outside and inside the Chaotian Gate, street pedlars vie to sell coloured new calendars, various sizes of gate gods, Spring Festival couplets, portraits of Zhong Kui [the Demon Queller], lion and tiger heads, golden-thread floral spring notes, and pennants of all kinds. The market is quite prosperous.²²

By the Wanli period (1573–1620) of the late Ming dynasty, the range of subject matter for *nianhua* increased. A number of important production centres emerged, the most famous being those at Yangliuqing in the western suburbs of Tianjin in the north and at Taohuawu in Suzhou in the south. Production at these workshops reached its height in the Qing dynasty.²³ The prints were influenced by classical Chinese paint-

ing, and the classification of subject followed that of painting and included: genre scenes; beautiful women; animals, birds and flowers; landscapes; and religious figures.²⁴ Although the quality of the design and printing varied considerably among *nianhua*, extant prints from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries give testimony to the high quality of work which could be achieved, and it has been said that “their refinement of composition, technique and colouring ... makes them comparable to the best Chinese genre paintings.”²⁵ By the late nineteenth century, *nianhua* had reached its widest audience.

While lithography nearly ended the craft in the main production centres, the low-level technology of woodblock-printing made it popular in rural areas.²⁶ New Year pictures were, thus, an artform which originated among the elite, was adopted by the rural population, and served both spheres simultaneously. In this study, the correlations found between the imagery on the Sichuanese embroideries, *nianhua*, and the woodblock-printed illustrations of the scholarly class suggest that these New Year prints played an important role as the artistic intermediary in the visual communication between strata of society in late imperial China.

Many of the embroidered designs of the Sichuanese embroideries show strong similarities to images found among the woodblock prints of the elite. These images may be divided into two types: those depicting general subjects such as birds on flowering branches which share not only the subject but compositional elements as well; and those whose subject-matter is exclusively connected to the socio-cultural milieu of the upper class and had no precedent in non-elite life. It is these images which are of greatest interest: their presence in the artistic repertoire of rural China is strong evidence in support of a dialogue in visual media between social strata.

In exploring this dissemination of artistic influence, this study focuses on the woodblock prints for which the images were of primary importance and did not serve as adjuncts to a text. Included in this group are painting manuals, single-sheet prints, and elite *nianhua*. While, in the broader context, this group encompasses a number of publications, this study examines works which may be considered fairly representative of the available elite woodblock pictures. These include but are not limited to the popular painting manuals known familiarly as the *Ten Bamboo Studio* and the *Mustard Seed Garden*, and a set of seventeenth-century single-sheet prints commonly referred to as the “Kaempfer series.” Although beyond the scope of this study, it should be noted that decorated letter or contract papers which circulated among the merchant class as well as the literati were printed with subject matter closely related to that found in the painting manuals. Many, in fact, drew their subjects from such works as the *Shizhuzhai jianpu* [*Ten Bamboo Studio Decorated Paper Album*], which was based on the *Ten Bamboo Studio*

Figure 4a. Bird on a flowering branch, from the so-called “Kaempfer series.” Full-colour woodblock print. Ming dynasty, early seventeenth century. British Museum (Photo: reproduced from Joseph Vedlich, *The Ten Bamboo Studio*, New York, 1979, 62–63).



Figure 4b. Chinese bulbul on a peony branch. From the set *Flowers from the Four Seasons*. Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Full-colour folk New Year print. 28 x 41 cm (Photo: reproduced from Bo Songnian, *Chinese New Year Pictures*, Beijing, 1995, fig. 173).

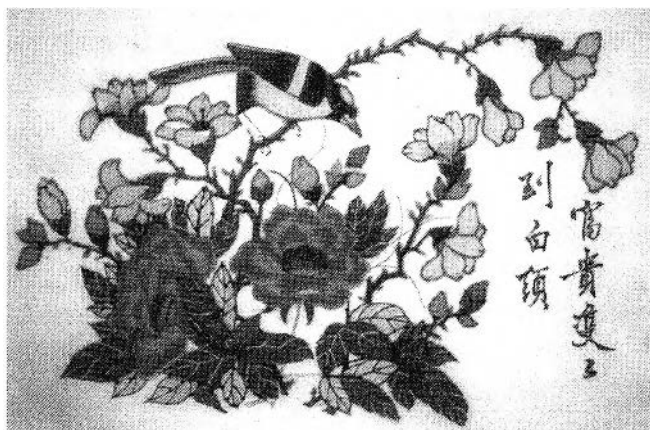


Figure 4c. Bird on a flowering branch. Detail of a bed cover. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. 233 x 164 cm. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, EDZ 1231 (Photo: author).

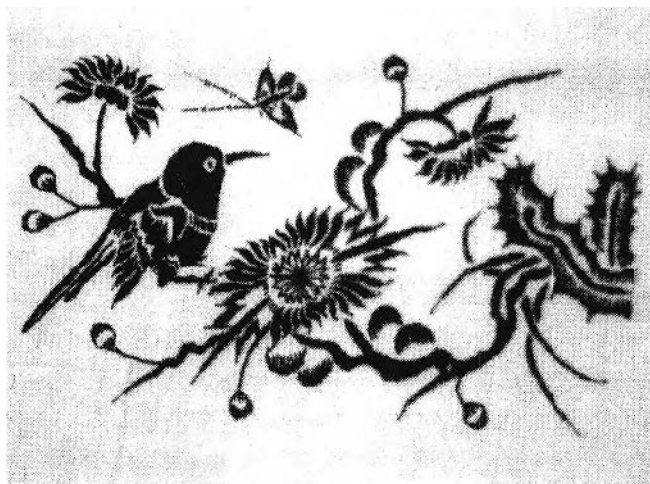


Figure 5a. Roundel with design of Buddha's hand citrons, lotus flowers and pomegranates. Detail of a bed valance. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. 196 x 35.5 cm. Royal Ontario Museum 994.28.45 (Photo: author).

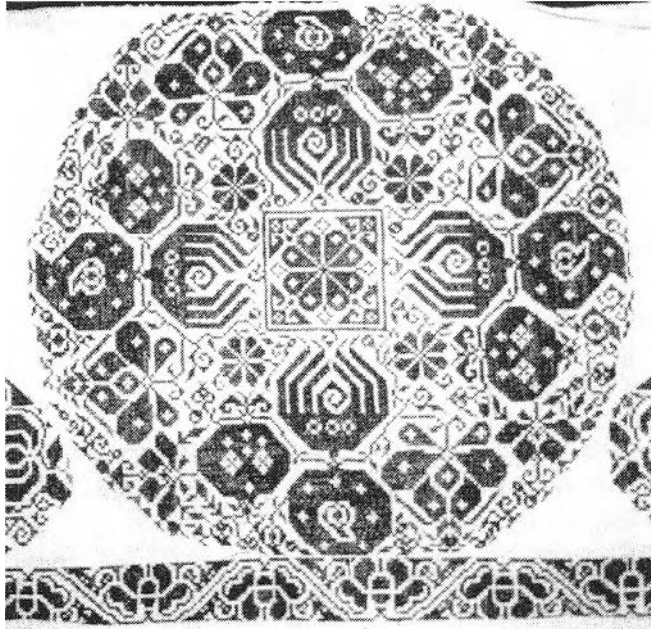


Figure 6a. Basket of pomegranates. Detail of a bed valance. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, 1069/1 (Photo: author).

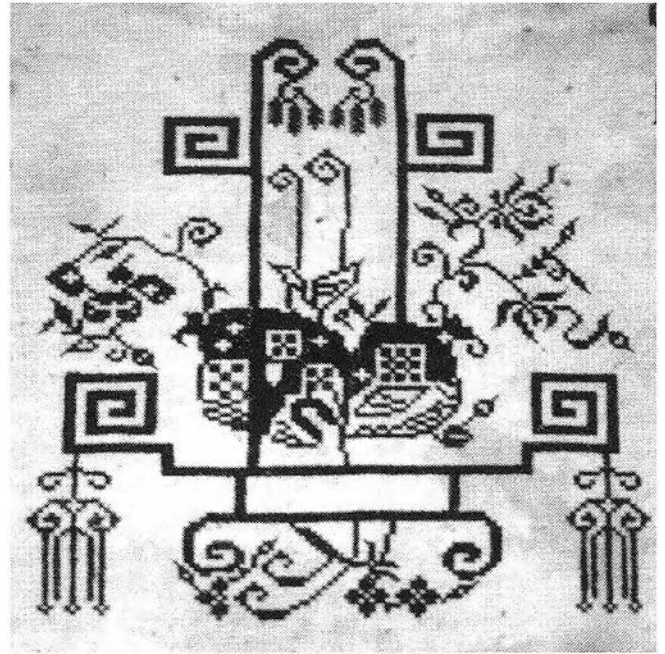


Figure 5b. Vase containing lotus flowers, Buddha's hand citrons and pomegranates. Detail of a cushion cover. Cotton cross-stitch embroidery on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. 54 x 41 cm. Royal Ontario Museum 980.287.21 (Photo: Royal Ontario Museum).



mentioned above.²⁷ The following analysis offers some general points of comparison; exact paths of influence are difficult to determine, as the details of production surrounding *nianhua* and folk art are most often not known.

Of the printed illustrations available to the elite in late imperial China, the woodblock-printed painting manuals are the most directly related to traditional Chinese painting. Two of the most influential and best known are the *Shizhuzhai shuhuapu* [*Treatise on the Paintings and Writings of the Ten Bamboo Studio*] of ca. 1643 (with a general introduction dated ca. 1633) by the painter and calligrapher Hu Zhengyan, and the *Jieziyuan huajuan* [*Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*] of 1679 by Wang Gai (the first complete edition appeared in 1701). Both utilized colour prints, were highly popular, and exist in a number of reprints.²⁸ While the *Ten Bamboo Studio* reflected scholarly taste of the period and has been described as “the most beautiful and artistic of the various books with wood-cuts after paintings,”²⁹ the *Mustard Seed Garden* was more obviously instructional, and is considered to be “the most enduring and influential of the painting manuals of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.”³⁰ In general, these works are divided into a number of sections on such subjects as bamboo, fruit, flowers and birds, and contain both illustrations as well as tips to their successful depiction. Closely related to the manuals in subject matter is a set of twenty-nine multi-coloured Chinese prints purchased in Japan by Engelbert Kaempfer, a German physician for the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC), and brought to Europe in

Figure 6b. Baskets of auspicious fruit and flowers. Detail of a bed valance. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, EDZ 1270 (Photo: author).

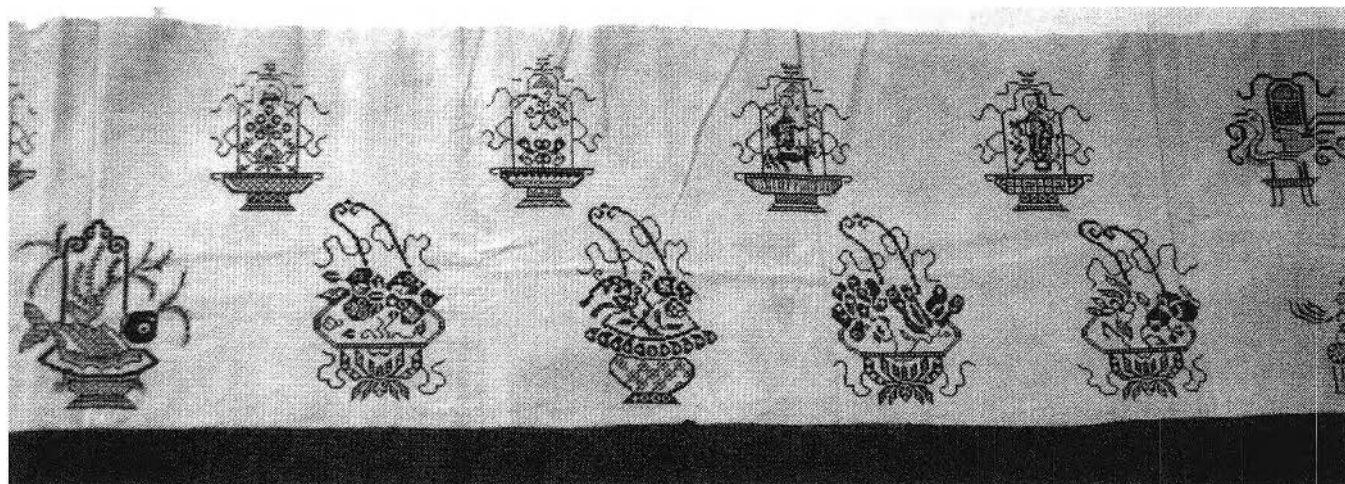
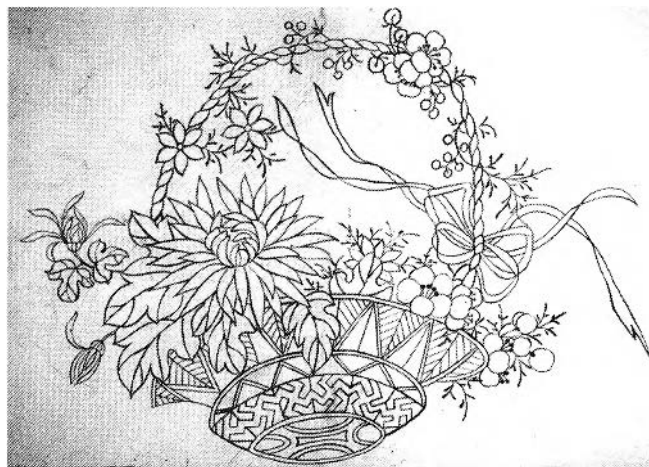


Figure 6c. Basket of flowers, from the so-called “Kaempfer series.” Full-colour woodblock print. Ming dynasty, early seventeenth century. British Museum (Photo: reproduced from Joseph Vedlich, *The Ten Bamboo Studio*, New York, 1979, 64–65).



Figure 6d. Basket of flowers. Embroidery pattern from Song Renqiao, *Cixiu fanben*, 1934–35, n.p. (Photo: author).

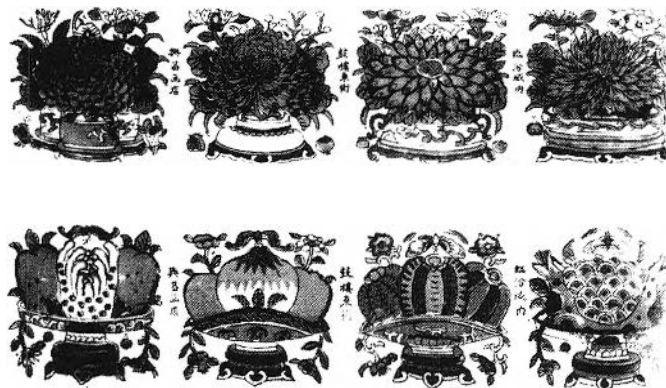


1692. They are now in the collection of the British Museum.³¹ Published in Suzhou by the scholar-calligrapher Ding Liangshi, the prints were drawn by Ding and other family members and include images of flowering plants, birds and insects in a natural setting, as well as still lifes of single baskets of fruit and flowers and more complex compositions of vases of flowers surrounded by a variety of objects. Most of the prints include a poem, and many provide the name of the artist, as indicated in some cases by the characters “made by” or “written by.” In the following comparisons, these prints will be used in conjunction with the Sichuanese embroideries to illustrate the range of influences in both media and social class.

Birds are one of the more popular images found in the blue-and-white embroideries. This is undoubtedly owing to

their overall visual appeal and universally recognized form. While it may be argued that this subject is too generic to allow any conclusions to be made regarding elite influence on rural culture, there are some similarities which are worth noting. Birds are also an important subject in the painting manuals, and entire sections are devoted to them. Shown either as full compositions or in detailed instructional “drawings,” the birds are depicted in a variety of positions: flying, resting, looking downward, or in the case of one particular image in the *Mustard Seed Garden*, fighting. The image of the single bird on the flowering branch is a common one, and a number of illustrations appear in both painting manuals. Particularly fine examples from the elite realm are found in the Kaempfer series (fig. 4a). This composition is also seen in other printed forms. From a set of

Figure 7a. Chrysanthemums; and Auspicious Fruit. Pair of full-colour folk New Year prints. Qing dynasty. 19 x 64 cm. (Photo: reproduced from Bo Songnian, *Chinese New Year Pictures*, Beijing, 1995, figs. 120 and 121).

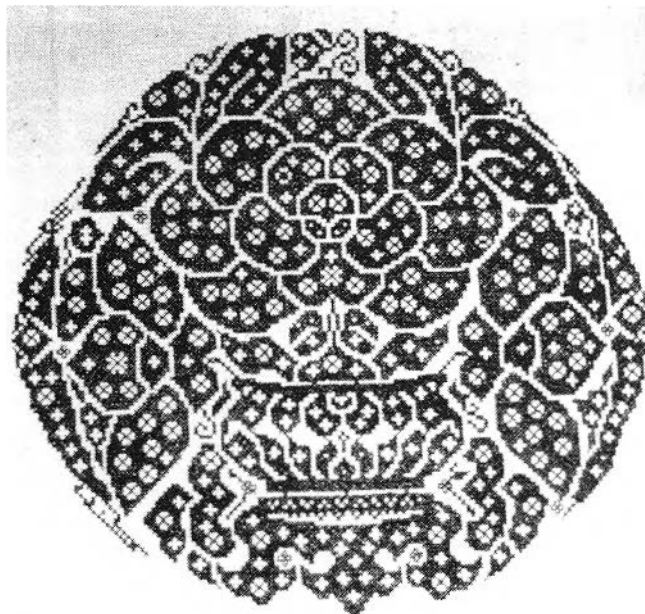


Qing-dynasty New Year prints depicting flowers and birds of the four seasons comes an image for spring in which a Chinese bulbul perches on a branch of budding peony (fig. 4b). Comparable images of birds perched on flowering branches appear among the motifs of the embroideries (fig. 4c).

Auspicious plants, representing hope for good fortune, wealth or many children, were another popular theme in Chinese visual art. These symbolic meanings, in combination with the overall decorativeness of the subject, ensured the popularity of fruit and flower designs, and it is not surprising that these are the most prevalent images found on the embroideries. Auspicious flowers and fruit were combined to create abstract, geometric forms for large roundels (fig. 5a) or were used in more conventional compositions in baskets or bowls (fig. 5b). In these examples, the embroiderers have used same combination of Buddha's hand citron, pomegranate and lotus with very different overall effects.

The images of baskets and bowls of auspicious fruit show the closest relationship to woodblock prints. Two cross-stitched pomegranates, representative of the desire for children owing to their many seeds, are placed in a wide-mouthed tall-handled basket from which tassels are hung from the top of the handle and the side of the basket (fig. 6a). Similarly, flowers were also displayed in baskets. A bed valance is embroidered with much more elaborate and lively baskets containing the same simple arrangement of two large pieces of fruit or flower blossoms (fig. 6b). Flowers could also be shown in more elaborate arrangements, an image which has its origins in traditional Chinese painting, dating to the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), as seen in the work of artists such as Li Song. This theme was popular in elite single-sheet prints of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and several fine examples may be found in the Kaempfer set (fig. 6c). The basket has the same form as that in the embroideries and an elaborately knotted ribbon floats from the top of the handle. A similar design is included among the folk embroidery designs of the *Cixiu fanben* where one dominant flowerhead sits among other flora in a similarly woven bamboo

Figure 7b. Flower in a bowl. Detail of a bed valance. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. 195.5 x 41.5 cm. Royal Ontario Museum 994.28.61 (Photo: author).



basket; ribbons and flowers decorate the basket's handle (fig. 6d). Although this work was not intended for cross-stitch specifically, we can see that such patterns were among the embroiderer's repertoire of available motifs.

An interesting variation of this theme is found in the brightly coloured popular New Year pictures, in which the flower baskets and the wide-mouthed bowls of fruit are shown in sets of four representing the seasons (fig. 7a). These compact designs are found in striking similarity on the embroideries, where these dense arrangements of fruits and flowers are recreated in densely worked cross-stitch (figs. 7b).

Associated with these images of auspicious plants is the archaic vase set among a scholar's possessions. Of the repertoire of images found on the embroideries, this is the most suggestive of elite culture and occurs with great frequency on extant examples. The development of this theme in traditional painting is linked to the appreciation of antique vases, a refined activity of the scholar class. The revival of Confucianism in the Song dynasty with its accompanying antiquarian and philological studies promoted an interest in past achievements in literature as well as in the arts.³² Antique as well as archaic objects were actively sought and collected in the late Ming and Qing dynasties.³³ Bronzes held particular esteem, for they were thought to carry with them the essence of the refined civilizations which had produced them. Thus, not only could one enjoy the shape of these vessels, but through the examination of them, one was also reminded of the ritual practices in ancient China.

Bronzes in antique forms were also popular vessels to hold flowers. The practice of arranging flowers in old bronze vases is

Figure 8a. Spring bouquet in a *fang gu*. Woodblock-printed illustration from *Fangshi mopu* [Mr Fang's Ink Album], 1588. 23.8 x 14.7 cm. (Photo: reproduced from *Mingdai banhua yishu tushu tezhan* [Exhibition of printed books of the Ming dynasty], Taipei, 1989, n.p.).

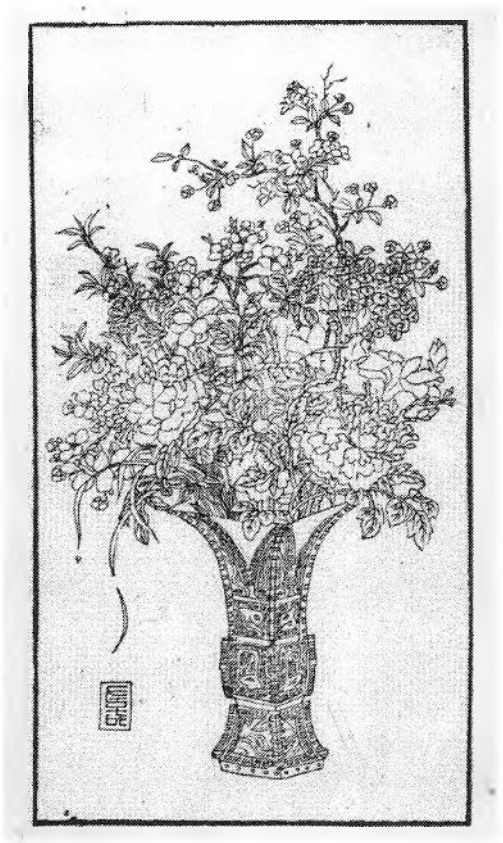


Figure 8b. Vase of flowers. Embroidery pattern from Song Renqiao, *Cixiu fanben*, 1934–35, n.p. (Photo: author).



Figure 8c. Flowers in a "Long-life" vase. Papercut. (Photo: reproduced from *Minjian jiezhimuban hua*, Changsha, 1995, fig. 98).

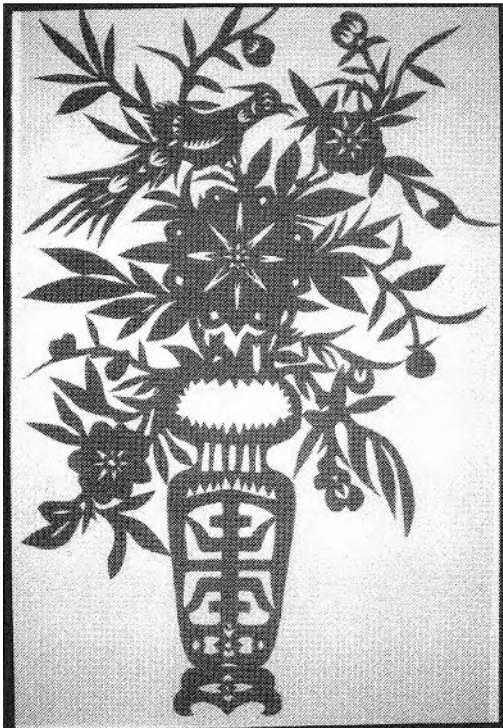


Figure 8d. Vase of flowers. Detail of a bed valance. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, EDZ 1473 (Photo: author).

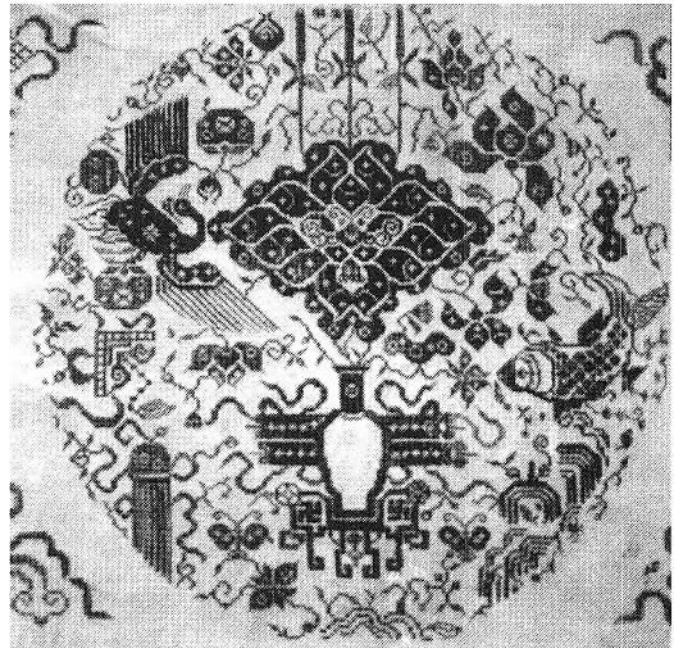


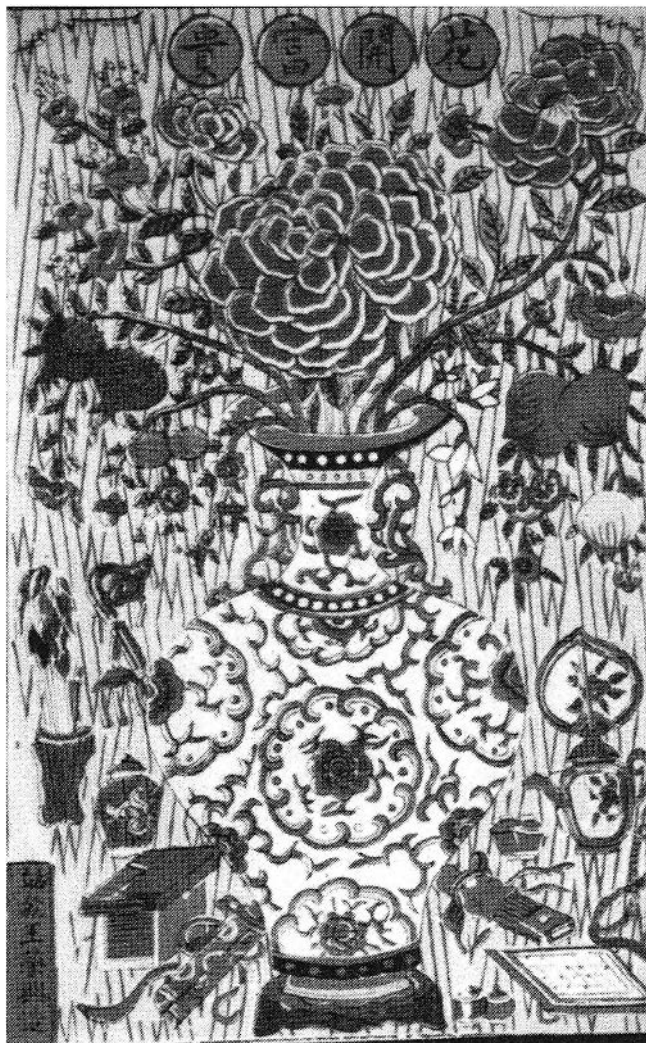
Figure 9a. Flowering plants in an archaistic vase surrounded by scholar's items. From the so-called "Kaempfer series." Full-colour woodblock print. Ming dynasty, early seventeenth century. British Museum (Photo: reproduced from Joseph Vedlich, *The Ten Bamboo Studio*, New York, 1979, 81).



Figure 9c. Flowering plants in a vase surrounded by scholar's items. Detail of a bed valance. Cotton cross-stitch on cotton, Sichuan, China. Late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, EDZ 1516 (Photo: author).



Figure 9b. Flowering plants in a vase surrounded by scholar's items (Photo: reproduced from *Nianhua* [New Year prints], Shanghai, n.d., fig. 35).



mentioned in the *Gegu yaolun* [*Essential Criteria for Antiquities*] of 1388 by Cao Zhao. In this work, Cao writes:

An ancient bronze that has been buried for many years has deeply absorbed the spirit of the earth. When it is used to hold flowers, their colours stay fresh and bright like a branch on a tree. They bloom quickly and withering is delayed, and they may even bear fruit.³⁴

Mentioned in the writing of the late Ming author Zhang Dai (1597–1684?) is a seventeenth-century antiques dealer who had a collection of sixteen slender wine vessels referred to as *meiren gu*, beautiful woman beakers. These, he wrote, were in great demand as flower vases.³⁵

As a subject in painting, the single ancient bronze vessel containing a variety of plants, flowering and otherwise, dates to the Song dynasty and had become quite popular in the Ming

and Qing dynasties. Known artists who painted this subject include Bian Wenjin (fl. early fifteenth century) and Sun Kehong (1532–1610).³⁶ In several Ming-dynasty paintings, these images were associated with the New Year as indicated by such titles as “Sui chao tu [New Year picture]” and “Sui chao gong hua [Offering of flowers for the New Year].”³⁷

This theme also found its way to woodblock prints. The Ming work, *Fangshi mopu [Mr Fang's Ink Album]* of 1588, shows a spring bouquet in a *fang gu*, a trumpet-shaped vessel based on an antique bronze form (fig. 8a).³⁸ Similarly, a colour print in the *Ten Bamboo Studio* illustrates a *gu* on a wooden stand containing a branch of fruit. This subject is found in both elite New Year prints and in folk art. An illustration from the embroidery patternbook, *Cixiu fanben*, contains the design of an elaborate vase holding sprays of assorted flowers, similar to that found in the Ming ink-album (fig. 8b). The subject is found in other folk art media including papercuts (fig. 8c) and blue-and-white cross-stitch (fig. 8d).

The association that these vessels had with literati life naturally led to imagery which came to include items from the scholar's desk. Woodblock prints of the late seventeenth century show the close association between the vase of flowers and scholarly accoutrements. While this subject is not found among the illustrations in the painting manuals, there are a number of examples in elite single-sheet prints and *nianhua* which suggest a certain popularity with this image. There are a number of highly detailed colour-prints from the Kaempfer series which show a vase of flowers surrounded by archaic vessels, books, auspicious fruit and painting scrolls (fig. 9a). Elite New Year prints from the first half of the eighteenth century also depict flowers arranged in elaborate vases, set among such items as books, folding fans with calligraphic inscriptions, and even a pair of eyeglasses.³⁹ The popular versions of these New Year prints allowed those who in their daily life could not enjoy the appreciation of antiquities to partake of this pleasure (fig. 9b).⁴⁰ Images of the vase of flowers set amidst scholar's items form the main motif on many of the embroideries. Although the designs are less complex than those of the woodblock prints, they still retain the overall flavour of the prints by including the most important elements: the vase of flowers (often placed on a small stand) and two or three items such as a *ruyi* sceptre, a musical instrument and a book (fig. 9c).

The similarity in imagery among the woodcut-book illustrations, New Year prints, and folk art forms as exemplified in the embroideries of rural Sichuan, suggests a dialogue through visual media between elite and non-elite culture in late imperial China. New Year prints, like illustrated books, promoted the sharing of certain aspects of culture across a broad base. They had the advantage of serving equally the mass population and the elite, and therefore were of great importance in the dissemi-

nation of ideas, values and beliefs. However, while the range of subjects in these prints is vast, paralleling those of traditional painting, not all themes were adopted into rural arts. An examination of elite images and their related ideas which were considered so pertinent to rural life to be found in the repertoire of artistic motifs can reveal something about the overall level of understanding of these motifs in rural Chinese society.

Of the vast range of subject matter in *nianhua*, those subjects whose symbolic meanings related to wishes of prosperity, many progeny and longevity were found most often in folk art. These are desires and practical notions which could easily be assimilated and understood by the viewer regardless of the level of education, and not surprisingly, they form the large majority of rural textile imagery. Among these are a variety of motifs relating to the hope both for many children and for sons who would find positions in the bureaucracy. Children were an important part of rural culture. Dreams for a child to achieve elite status through education were particularly strong and were manifested in designs reflecting wishes for a scholarly life; included here are a child astride a *qilin*, the vase of flowers among scholarly objects, and even “mandarin squares” on clothing. These show wishes for a hopeful outcome in the life of the child, yet absent are any images suggestive of the means to get there.

Of all the motifs found on the embroideries, the antique vase with auspicious plants surrounded by scholarly objects is most closely associated with elite culture. The pastime of enjoying antiquities and scholar's items was not part of daily life for the non-elite, and therefore these designs would have had no precedent in folk imagery. The lack of embroidered motifs relating to other scholarly activities (there are no illustrations from literary works, for example, except the most popular stories and legends) suggests that these images were used to show a desire that all mothers had for their sons without the knowledge of how this was to be accomplished. In a similar sentiment, folk versions of badges of rank (mandarin squares) are found on children's clothing, again suggesting this hope for the scholarly life. It should also be mentioned that knowledge of the complex symbolism in these motifs was not required to enjoy them. The overall beauty of flower and fruit designs gave them particular appeal, and thus they appear with great frequency on the textiles, particularly in the form of the bouquet in the vase.

While the transposition of ideas through oral and written means has been explored by others, those of the visual realm have not received the same attention. These visual sources, however, have certain advantages over their verbal counterparts: they did not depend on a certain level of literacy or on similarity in regional dialect to be understood, and they received distribution on a wide level. Thus, they, too, form an essential part of the communication process between strata of Chinese society.

New Year prints served as important intermediaries between the art of the elite and non-elite cultures in China. Connected by technique, theme and style to the illustrated books of the scholar class, New Year prints allowed for the wider dissemination of the tradition of literati painting which previously had been available only to the scholar class. Their ultimate influence may be found in the most important creative outlet available to rural women: embroidered textiles. However, far from being slavish copies of book illustrations or *nianhua*, these embroideries show the individual artistic talents of their makers. Most importantly, they are tangible evidence of the communication between elite and common spheres and can shed light on the communication modes within Chinese culture, yielding an understanding of Chinese culture as a whole, and providing an important glimpse into the life of a population which has left little in terms of a written record.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, David Johnson, "Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), 34–72; and James Hayes, "Specialists and Written Materials in the Village World," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), 75–111.
- 2 Johnson, "Communication, Class, and Consciousness," 34.
- 3 Johnson, "Communication, Class, and Consciousness," 36.
- 4 Pengxian is located approximately sixty kilometres northwest of Chengdu; and Renshou, is about eighty kilometres south of Chengdu, or in terms of 1930s transportation, "about 2 days [sic] travel by rickshaw." (Comment made by Kathleen Spooner. See note 6 below).
- 5 The majority of these embroideries are now in Chicago's Field Museum. Carl Schuster's publications on the subject include: "Some Peasant Embroideries from Western China," *Embroidery* (September 1935), 87–96; "Comparative Study of Motives in Western Chinese Folk Embroideries," *Monumenta Serica*, II (1936–37), 21–80; and "Peasant Embroideries of China," *Asia*, XXXVII (1937), 26–31.
- 6 Interview with Dr John Mullett. His parents were Canadian dental missionaries stationed in Chengdu and collected examples while there in the 1930s. These sellers are also mentioned in notes made by Kathleen Spooner who accompanied her missionary husband to Sichuan in the 1930s. These may be found in the collection of the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia.
- 7 See, for example, Justus Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese: With Some Account of Their Religious, Governmental, Educational, and Business Customs and Opinions. With Special but not Exclusive Reference to Fuchau*, 2 vols (New York, 1865).
- 8 See, for example, Schuster, "Peasant Embroideries of China."
- 9 Schuyler Cammann, "Embroidery Techniques in Old China," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, XVI (1962), 16–39. Recently, interest in Chinese folk art has resulted in the study and documentation of embroidery, especially with regard to work by China's ethnic minorities. While few works deal with cross-stitch specifically, several monographs mention the technique; these include: China House Gallery, *Richly Woven Traditions. Costume of the Miao of Southwest China* (New York, 1987); and Wang Yarong's richly illustrated work, *Zhongguo minjian cixiu* [*Chinese Folk Embroidery*] (Xianggang, 1985), also published in English as *Chinese Embroidery* (Hong Kong, 1985; and Tokyo, 1987). Few studies have made cross-stitch the focus. The most valuable of these is Zuo Hanzhong, ed., *Minjian cixiu tiaohua* [*Folk embroidery and cross-stitch*] (Changsha, 1994), in which a distinction appears to be made between cross-stitch and other folk embroidery techniques. While this work covers other types of stitches, it concentrates on blue-and-white cross-stitch; its value lies in its profusion of illustrations of pieces and photographs of the women who made them.
- 10 Anna G. Granger, "Rescuing a Little-Known Chinese Art – How an Explorer's Wife 'Discovered' a Fascinating Style of Peasant Embroidery in Far Western China, and Helped to Save it from Oblivion," *Natural History* (January 1938), 52–61.
- 11 Zuo Hanzhong, *Minjian cixiu tiaohua*, 10.
- 12 Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Education, Social Life, Arts, Religion, Etc. of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants* (New York and London, 1857), 124.
- 13 Three leaves of this work are illustrated in Sören Edgren, *Chinese Rare Books in American Collections* (New York, 1984), figs. 23b, 24, and 25.
- 14 Ren Songqiao, *Cixiu fanben* [*An Embroidery Pattern Book*], 2 vols (Shenyang, 1934–35).
- 15 David Crockett Graham, *Folk Religion in Southwest China* (Washington, D.C., 1961), 32.
- 16 In the expression "*liansheng guizi*," the hope of having many sons who will become officials, the word *lian* can mean both lotus and continually, and *sheng* can mean a musical instrument or to give birth. A second expression associated with this image is "*qilin songzi, zhuangyuan jidi*:" the *qilin* sends a son who will pass the imperial examination with top honours.
- 17 This summation of the complex interrelationship between the economic expansion in the Qing dynasty and its social implications is based on the work of Susan Naquin and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven and London, 1987).
- 18 On the history of woodblock prints in China, see Wang Bomin, *Zhongguo banhuashi* [*History of Chinese printed illustration*] (Shanghai, 1981) and Thomas Francis Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward* (New York, 1925).
- 19 See K.T. Wu, "Ming Printing and Printers," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, VII (1942–43), 203–68.
- 20 On the history of *nianhua*, see Bo Songnian, *Chinese New Year Pictures* (Beijing, 1995); Li Hua, *Chinese Woodcuts* (Beijing, 1995); Maria Rudova, *Chinese Popular Prints* (Leningrad, 1988); Wang

- Shucun, ed., *Zhongguo minjian nianhua shitulu* [Chinese Folk New Year Pictures], 2 vols (Shanghai, 1991); and Zheng Zhenduo, *Zhongguo gudai mukehua xuanji* [Selected Chinese woodblock pictures] (Beijing, 1984).
- 21 Wu Shanzhu, ed., *Zhongguo gongyi meishu da cidian* [Dictionary of Chinese Arts and Crafts] (Beijing, 1988), 855.
- 22 Li Hua, *Chinese Woodcuts*, 84.
- 23 Wang Bomin, *Zhongguo banhuashi*, 169–70.
- 24 Refer to the lists provided by Li Hua, *Chinese Woodcuts*, 85 and 90.
- 25 Rudova, *Chinese Popular Prints*, 8.
- 26 This was a time-consuming activity which involved not only carving the woodblocks and printing them, but also making the paper by hand, as well. See Zuo Hanzhong, ed., *Minjian jianzhi mubanhua* [Folk papercuts and woodblock prints] (Changsha, 1995), 37–42.
- 27 A second source for the study of decorated letter-paper designs is the *Luoxuan biangu jian pu* [Wisteria Studio Album of Stationery Decorated with Ancient and Modern Designs] of 1626 by Wu Faxiang. For colour reproductions of these decorated papers, see Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), colourplate 71; and Chu-tsing Li and James C.Y. Watt, eds, *The Chinese Scholar's Studio: Artistic Life in the Late Ming Period* (New York, 1987), fig. 27. See also Frances Wood, *Chinese Illustration* (London, 1985); and T.C. Lai, *Chinese Decorated Letter-Paper* (Hong Kong, 1978).
- 28 On the *Ten Bamboo Studio*, see Osvald Sirén, *A History of Later Chinese Painting*, 2 vols (1938; repr. New York, 1978), II, 56; and Robert Treat Paine, Jr, "The Ten Bamboo Studio: Its Early Editions, Pictures, and Artists," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, V (1951), 39–54. On the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, see A. K'ai-ming Ch'iu, "The Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chuan (Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual)," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, V (1951), 55–69.
- 29 Sirén, *A History of Later Chinese Painting*, II, 56.
- 30 Wang Fang-yu in Edgren, *Chinese Rare Books*, 36.
- 31 Twenty-three of these prints are illustrated in Joseph Vedlich, *The Ten Bamboo Studio* (New York, 1979).
- 32 For a discussion of archaism in the Song period, see William Watson, "On Some Categories of Archaism in Chinese Bronze," *Ars Orientalis*, IX (1973), 1–13; and his "Sung Bronzes," *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, XXXII (1959–60), 33–38.
- 33 Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things. Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana and Chicago, 1991), 108.
- 34 Cao Zhao, *Gegu yaolun* [Essential Criteria for Antiquities], 1388. This passage has been translated from a facsimile of an early Ming copy reproduced in Sir Percival David, *Chinese Connoisseurship* (New York and Washington, 1971), 7b.
- 35 Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 108–09.
- 36 These works, as well as a number of other examples, are illustrated in Huang Yung-chuan, *The Art of Classical Chinese Flower Arrangement* (Taipei, 1986). Here, the Women's Garden and Art Club of the Republic of China have recreated floral displays found in Chinese pictorial art from the collection of the National Palace Museum as well as other institutions. This work discusses the various types of arrangements and gives a brief history on each.
- 37 These are illustrated in Huang Cailang, "Banyin pinghuatu," in *Zhongguo quantong nianhua yishu tezhan* [Special exhibition of the art of the traditional Chinese New Year print] (Taipei, 1991), 52.
- 38 Fang Yulu's monochrome work contained 385 illustrations. Wu, "Ming Printing and Printers," 205.
- 39 These fine quality prints may be found in Zheng Zhenduo, *Zhongguo gudai mukehua xuanji*, VIII.
- 40 See Gerhard Pommerantz-Liedtke, *Chinesische neujahrsbilder* (Dresden, 1961), 33 and 34.