

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## THE CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF PRAYERS AND INNOVATIVE FORMS OF FOLK PILLOW TOP

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## ABSTRACT

As a kind of folk art, pillow top has rich cultural connotation and innovative vitality of expressions. By analyzing the auspicious symbolic elements of pillow top art and emotional expressions such as praying for wealth and fame, beauty and love, blessing and longevity, good fortune, and reproductive worship, this paper extracts the pattern and color matching elements suitable for innovative design to show the forms of expression. The theme of pillow top pattern is mostly auspicious symbols representing auspicious meaning, which is reflected in people's daily life, that is, the emotional expression of blessing culture. The culture of praying for blessings continues to modern times and has permeated people's daily life. Pillow top art can seek innovative forms of expression with the help of its rich emotional language and auspicious symbolic elements, and with reference to the successful cases of Taiwan's cultural and creative products.

## KEYWORDS

pillow top, pray for blessing, auspicious symbol, innovative forms of expression.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pillow top pattern is the most aesthetic part of the pillow, and its theme or pattern is mainly based on traditional auspicious patterns, reflecting the common psychology of blessing in people's daily life at that time. At present, in people's social life, we often see cultural phenomena and design forms with the connotation of traditional blessing culture, which is the extension of people's traditional emotional requirements of praying for fortune and blessing. With the development of science, technology and the increasing diversification of modern design techniques, it provides more possibilities for the innovative design of traditional folk pillow top art.

## 2. THE EXPRESSION OF PILLOW TOP PATTERN IN CURRENT LIFE

Different regions and lifestyles give birth to different cultures and create different nationalities. Chinese people in Han Dynasty often express their yearning for a better life through modeling and decorative patterns that strongly express the auspicious and symbolic significance of seeking beauty, celebrating, expressing themselves and conveying emotions. It embodies different meanings of humanities and society (Cui and Zhang, 2009). A woman will embroider the pillow top before getting married so that she can give it to her husband, parents-in-law and other family members. Therefore, the pattern of pillow top embroidery is generally associated with the characteristics of natural animals, plants and ecological phenomena. Their simple thoughts, feelings and aesthetic taste are poured into the back of the small pattern. And auspicious patterns become the most common choice of pillow top embroidery patterns. It can be said that the pattern on the top of the pillow has become a kind of auspicious symbol because it contains the emotion and aesthetic concept of women and integrates the folk meaning of auspicious culture, and it can

be presented as a kind of blessing culture in the social life of contemporary people.

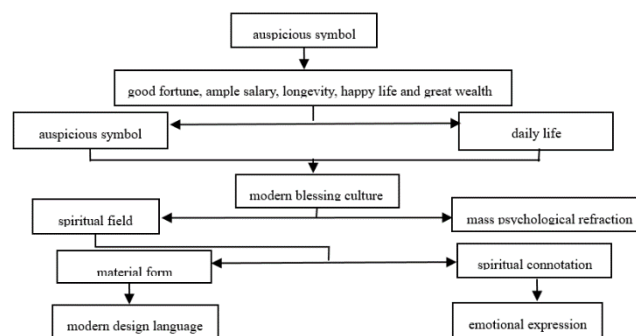


Figure 1: Auspicious symbols and modern blessing culture

With thousands of years of historical civilization and changes in China, the culture of blessing has been deeply integrated into people's daily life. The auspicious pattern and color matching of the traditional folk pillow top are only a display of the concept of blessing. In modern times, the content of blessing culture is more specific and formal. In the connotation of Chinese culture, happiness, wealth and longevity are not only a kind of satisfaction at the material level, but also the pursuit of a better life at the spiritual level. For example, in the daily life of modern people, there are still traditional ways of praying for the god of wealth, worshipping Buddha, praying for Guanyin and offering sacrifices to ancestors, as well as the expectation of passing the examination by forwarding the Jinli. In fact, all these are the continuation of the idea of praying for blessing in people's minds since ancient times. Modern design techniques can transform the

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concept of blessing into visual patterns, colors and characters, and gradually develop into a materialized social phenomenon, forming a set of blessing symbolic system and design language, as shown in Figure 1.

### 3. EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION OF PILLOW TOP PATTERN

Auspiciousness is the reflection of people's yearning for and pursuit of good luck and fortune. Chinese traditional patterns have the characteristics: that is, the picture must be intentional and the meaning must be auspicious. Auspicious culture was once called five blessings- that is a collection of blessings. According to the record of *Shangshu Hongfan*, that is, what the folk usually call, good fortune, ample salary, longevity, happy life and great wealth. The form of expression of auspicious patterns must use material as the carrier. Pillow top auspicious patterns of the material carrier are a variety of cloth, needle and thread and some also need paper-cutting and painting patterns. The source of patterns in traditional folk costumes is the mysterious nature. As a kind of folk art, pillow top contains female embroiders' careful observation of nature and love for daily life. In the process of making the pillow top, how to combine the object of the pillow top with the appropriate pattern is necessary when considering the auspicious meaning and emotional expression of the pattern. As a kind of auspicious symbol, auspicious pattern needs to be realized through metaphor, hint, symbol, borrowing and pun. The emotional expression of the pillow top pattern can be summarized into the following five points: praying for wealth and seeking fame, praying for happiness and longevity, seeking beauty and expressing love, pursuing good fortune and avoiding evil, and reproductive worship. At the same time, the theme selection and pattern matching in the pillow top pattern depend on the emotional needs of the producer, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Emotional language icon for the pillow top pattern.**

	Themes	Patterns
praying for wealth and seeking fame	rich and noble; gold and jade; fame and wealth	goldfish, begonia, rooster, peony, crab
praying for happiness and longevity	many children; more blessings; more longevity	pomegranate, bergamot, peach, pine, crane
seeking beauty and expressing love	fish playing with lotus; mandarin duck playing in the water; phoenix playing with peony; phoenix through peony	fish, mandarin duck, lotus, phoenix, peony
pursuing good fortune and avoiding evil	dragon and phoenix; eight immortals; religious theme	dragon, phoenix, flute, basket, sword, Falun, tiger
reproductive worship	baby sitting on lotus; Guanyin SongZi; Kirin SongZi	babies, lotus, Guanyin, unicorns

As shown in Table 1, the expression of praying for blessings and fame on the pillow top pattern is as follows: blooming wealth, rich marriage, fame, peace, splendor and so on. For example, peony flowers, which symbolize wealth, are generally used alone to show blooming wealth. There is also a combination of patterns: goldfish, begonia, boys and so on constitute *the house full of gold and jade*. Big roosters and peony can represent fame and wealth. There is also a direct use of written narration to express the purpose of seeking wealth. Praying for happiness and longevity is the expression of spiritual peace and good moral character in Chinese traditional thought. Chinese people generally believe that only when there is a guarantee of wealth and peace at the material level, and spiritual peace and virtue at the spiritual level, there is a real blessing. Xu Shen from the Eastern Han Dynasty in his book *Shuowen Jiezi* said that "Blessing is a kind of favour and protection." He also said that it was a phonetic character with the sound of *show*. The word blessing is related to prayer. It means that only with the blessing of the gods can one be lucky. Therefore, the most important thing in praying for blessings is the mind, which belongs to the higher requirements of the spiritual level. For example, *Sanduo pattern* is the combination of pomegranate bergamot and fairy peach. Pomegranate has many seeds, which can be associated with many children. The homophonic meaning of bergamot melon means many blessings. Peaches are extended to longevity, implying longevity. Beauty and love are the eternal pursuit of human beings and the eternal standard to measure all the beautiful and loved things in Chinese traditional culture. Because pillow top embroidery is generally a free creation of female embroiders based on their own artistic appreciation ability and skill level, the patterns that show the complex of seeking beauty and expressing love are generally

not dealt with separately, but combined with the common patterns of other four kinds of emotional themes, with a double auspicious meaning. Pursuing good fortune and avoiding evil is an important psychological and cultural feature in ancient China and the expressive theme of folk art, such as the *fengshui* theory in ancient China, the Buddha sculpture in the temple grottoes, the murals in the tomb, the totem patterns on clothing, and so on. For example, the dragon and Phoenix totem were worshipped in ancient China as the spiritual pillar of the ancestors' worship of supernatural divine power, and people simulated the forms of various animals in nature and created it, thus expressing their awe of the mysterious unknown forces in the universe. It has become the sustenance of the good wish of pursuing good fortune and avoiding evil. Reproduction is the most basic need of human beings and the only way to continue life. Therefore, the reproductive worship has played an important role in the development of human civilization, gradually forming the *yin and yang* theory of Chinese traditional culture, that is the combination of yin and yang to produce all things. It also forms all kinds of patterns and shapes of Chinese traditional folk art. For example, in the pillow top pattern art, there are "butterfly and flowers" and "fish and lotus" themes that express the theme of love and emotional blending. There are pomegranate patterns of many children, baby patterns, birth of noble children patterns and so on. Women gradually perceive and comprehend similar emotions and knowledge when they are young, and when they grow up, they will express them in embroidery works for their sweetheart. There are a large number of metaphors in this kind of embroidery works, such as butterfly, fish, phoenix to embody males and lotus to embody females, as in "butterfly in love with flowers", "fish playing with lotus" and "phoenix wearing peony" and so on. It can be seen that the perceptual language of the case of the pillow top picture is related to the psychological needs of people praying for blessing at that time.

### 4. THE EXPRESSION OF THE CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF BLESSING ON THE TOP OF THE PILLOW IN REAL LIFE

Praying for blessings actually means that people make a wish to the gods, especially when they encounter bad luck or some unpleasant things, hoping to be protected by the gods, increase their good luck, save themselves from danger, and overcome the difficult times safely (Sun, 2009). Blessing culture is not only the inheritance of national culture, but also under the special influence of regional culture. In Chinese people's life, all kinds of blessing elements can be seen everywhere, from setting off firecrackers during the Spring Festival to hanging red lanterns on the Lantern Festival. Behind every act of blessing, there is the inheritance of traditional blessing culture and its symbolic significance (Liu, 2017). Blessing always runs through a variety of life etiquette and sacrificial activities, interspersed in people's daily practice and work. In Chinese traditional customs, praying for blessings is related to color on the one hand and auspicious patterns on the other.

First of all, blessing is the worship of nature and gods. Blessing activities belong to the category of belief folklore. It has a certain religious color, and it is often sheltered by gods through sacrificial activities. At the same time, it is also realized through some folk activities (Liu, 2013). Take the pillow top in the northeast region collected in the folk costume study hall of Jiangnan University as an example. According to the color analysis, the background color and edge of the pillow top are mostly white and black blue, which is compared with the color matching of other areas. It's a special phenomenon. This is related to the folk culture of the northeast region. It is the birthplace of Manchu, where white symbolizes the sky in Manchu culture, while black is fertile land and blue is water. Meanwhile white is regarded as inauspicious in the Central Plains. It is inevitable that white will not be used as a common color for daily utensils.

Secondly, from the perspective of auspicious patterns, the ancients' worship of nature came into being in the form of symbols. In daily life, people feel helpless to all kinds of natural disasters and feel that their own strength was small, so through sacrifices to the above worship objects, they can produce a variety of totem symbols and patterns. Therefore, auspicious patterns have the power to pray in the subconscious of human beings. People use this highly generalized auspicious symbol to heighten their psychological requirements of praying for good fortune and avoiding evil. For example, the birth of life means the inheritance of the family's heirs. A mother begins to prepare clothes for her baby before he is born. Clothes, bedding, shoes and socks are all sewn by the mother herself. The mother will also sew ear pillows and cloth tigers for the baby to play with. As shown in Figure 2, the ear pillow is full of considerate and humanized design. In order to avoid the ear being squeezed when the baby is lying on its side, the ear can be put into the ear pillow with a hole in the middle, and the five poison patterns can be taken, which is intended to attack poison and drive away insect pests and protect the baby's health. The tiger is

thought to have the function of repelling evil spirits in people's traditional psychology. As shown in Figure 3, the cloth tiger is a three-dimensional shape, so the pillow top pattern can be made separately and installed on the pillow.



Figure 2: Five poisonous pattern ear pillow.



Figure 3: Cloth tiger pillow.

## 5. INNOVATIVE DESIGN ELEMENTS OF PILLOW TOP

In recent years, China has gradually adjusted its economic policy to improve the development of its own cultural industry, and by strengthening the protection of traditional culture and advocating the inheritance of excellent traditional culture, it aims to enhance the overall strength and competitiveness of our cultural industry. Under the background of vigorously advocating the protection of traditional culture, there are many ways to explore how to protect and inherit the traditional folk art of pillow top embroidery, and even make its own national brand. The pattern and color of the pillow top is the unique aesthetic carrier of the pillow top, which is reflected in the variability and plasticity of its pattern and single pattern, as well as its gorgeous color collocation full of national characteristics.

### 5.1 The pattern as the aesthetic subject

If the emotional language of the traditional folk pillow top is the visual communication of all kinds of life etiquette and beautiful emotions in daily life at that time, then in the context of current social life, naturally, pillow top patterns can also be used to materialize self-aesthetic emotion and aesthetic experience. In recent years, the application of Chinese elements in the design field is increasing day by day, forming a Chinese style design language. The highest ideal of life that the traditional Chinese people have always aspired to: wealth and longevity, the addition of officials, and the house full of children and grandchildren. It is also the beautiful demand of people in real life. In the new social context, these beautiful requirements also run through all fields of modern people's food, clothing, housing, transportation, education and pleasure, and are conveyed by innovative designers with novel design language to convey the deeper pursuit of human life.

Pattern is the aesthetic subject of pillow top. To explore the innovative form of pillow top embroidery art, we can rely on the pattern of pillow top. Patterns are actually a repetitive process of natural things. You can take any shape you like, repeat it and keep it at intervals and you will have a pattern. Because patterns are such a natural phenomenon, they can be formed even without the same elements or intermittent repeating elements (Robert, 2010). As a common pattern of pillow top, butterfly pattern has strong emotional language and aesthetic form, and can be

endowed with new visual charm under the creation of modern design techniques. For example, British artist *Damihurst* uses butterfly images to create patterns. The same pattern conveys different aesthetic concepts in different historical periods, and the contemporary era of aesthetic generalization will certainly find the existence form of auspicious patterns in the state of daily life. It may be a piece of inadvertently auspicious embroidery on the jeans, or the simple *Sanduo* pattern on the purse. Auspicious pattern is the product of the crisscross of art and life. It does not need to rigidly adhere to what form of expression. As long as it conforms to the law of formal beauty, it can make people stop and stare at the simple traditional art again.

### 5.2 The collocation of colors with national characteristics

Based on the color analysis of 117 pairs of pillow tops collected by the Folk Clothing Study Hall of Jiangnan University, we can see that there are 8 colors used to make pillow tops, which are red, blue, pink, white, yellow, green, black and purple. Among them, red is the most widely used color in terms of quantity and background color, which fully reflects the custom of red preference in folk art. The second most used color, in terms of quantity and background color, is blue. Pink is the most commonly used color as the main pattern, and it is also common to be used as a background color. White, yellow, green, black and purple are commonly used as background colors, which are commonly used and embellished in the main pattern. It can be seen that the color of pillow top art basically follows the color habit of folk art.

Red is one of the main colors of folk art. Red symbolizes the picture of a happy life and a prosperous day. At the same time, the color design of folk art also attaches great importance to the collocation of colors. Red with green brings good luck and creates a great sense of beauty. In addition, there are sayings like "it is not good to have only red and green, add yellow can support the color." and "Purple is like bone, green like tendon." which shows that folk art not only praises red, but also pursues the richness of color (Xie and Yang, 2017). *Huang Weihuan*, the designer of the *Kang Award* certificate, used the five-color cloud as the design concept for the legal award design of the *Kang Award*. Among them, *Lotus Purple*, *Bamboo Moon*, *Loofah Yellow*, *Jade Green* and *Crane Red* are Chinese traditional colors, combined with the shape of moire, so that the certificate is full of antique charm.

## 6. PILLOW TOP ART'S INNOVATIVE EXPRESSION FORM OF DESIGN

Folk art occupies an important position in China's long national culture and shows strong vitality after thousands of years of development and evolution. The ancients formed a set of visual image of folk art through many factors, such as shape, color, line, texture and so on. The pattern and color of the pillow top can be extracted as a design innovation, combined with fashion design techniques for a new visual interpretation, or as a unique pattern of folk art, with contemporary design techniques to interpret traditional patterns. The vigorous development of cultural and creative industries in Taiwan has brought new ideas to the innovative design of pillow top art.

### 6.1 Fashion character

Under the fine background that the country strongly advocates protection and inheritance, folk art can also be combined with the artistic means of modern design to create a fashion brand that belongs to its own nation. Pillow top pattern is a form of traditional folk art, which expresses the demand for happiness and auspiciousness in different forms from different levels, and its aesthetic forms are basically fixed. Therefore, the pattern of the pillow top, as a kind of auspicious symbol, is a kind of design resource in itself. The richness of the theme, the uniqueness of modeling, the distinct exaggeration of color, and the unique femininity can be used as design elements. Taiwan brand *FRANZ*, founded in 2001, combines the streamline modeling elements of European new art with oriental aesthetic thinking, combines relief and sculpture modeling, uses dreamy colors, and actively integrates global aesthetic elements. It is a successful case of transforming traditional art into fashion.

### 6.2 National character

Due to the ideological trend of modern western industrialization, the theories and methods of design "life style theory" and "symbiotic aesthetics" emphasized by Chinese traditional aesthetics have not been paid attention to. Obviously, the fundamental reason for this is the neglect of Chinese traditional aesthetic culture and spiritual connotation, which turns a blind eye to the extremely important philosophical connotation of landscape humanistic thought system and poetic spirit in oriental aesthetics, which is established on the basis of mutual harmony and



mutual respect between men and all dimensions of space life. As a result, Chinese modern design art has lost its cultural characteristics (Li, 2015). Folk art has the unique cultural values of oriental thinking, which is shown in all aspects of life, food, clothing, housing and transportation, and vividly displayed in various artistic forms, and always runs through people's thinking on the ultimate ideal state that can be achieved by life. Pillow top is a kind of folk art. How to keep up with the aesthetic trend of the times while maintaining its uniqueness as a traditional folk art needs to trace back to its origin in its own national characteristics and absorb the vitality of folk art.

For example, Fujian and Taiwan have deep-rooted local concepts, clan concepts and folk beliefs, which contain the same beliefs and wishes of the people of Fujian and Taiwan. The rich and varied art forms, decorative patterns and color symbols with regional characteristics in Fujian and Taiwan convey the common aspirations of people on both sides of the strait. In the folk cultural activities such as festival season, marriage and funeral, birthday celebration, etc., it reflects people's wish for life reproduction, peace and joy, reunion and happiness, which are integrated into different art forms and decorations (Lu, 2016). Taiwan's cultural creation brand *Ayuan* soap focuses on all-natural herbal handmade soap. Its founder, *Ayuan*, adheres to the brand concept of cherishing the person and being kind to the environment, integrates with Chinese traditional elements, and devotes himself to the lost labor aesthetics. What he pursues is not "the best", but "just right" because the latter means abstinence, rationality and concessions. There are so many choices in modern society that people are at a loss as to what to do, so it is all the more necessary to break up with the unnecessary (Wang and Lai, 2017). Taiwanese cultural products often express creativity with the help of Chinese character culture, especially the expressive force of traditional Chinese characters, taking the connotation of Chinese character culture as the core to design and innovate Chinese character-related products. At this time, Chinese characters are no longer the carrier of knowledge, but also become a creative language. The Chinese people are familiar with the five blessings, that is, good fortune, ample salary, longevity, happy life and great wealth, which is often used in modeling expression, product name formulation, etc. It can also be reused in calligraphy or variants of characters to form patterns such as *Baifu* and *Baishou* (Lu, 2013). Figure 4 shows the Double Happiness Cup by Taiwan designer *Qiu Jianji*.



Figure 4: Double Happiness Cup

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The pillow top pattern is an auspicious pattern, which is the external expression of Chinese traditional blessing culture. The most common auspicious pattern is still active in the design art today. Because of the extension of the blessing culture behind it, it has been given a new meaning in the new cultural context and social context. In the process of pursuing beauty, the traditional pillow top art can draw lessons from modern design techniques and carry out innovative design from its own basic pattern and color matching. The pattern of the pillow top has rich meaning, and the pattern can be innovated as the basic design element. Its color matching is inherited from the traditional folk art and can be used as an innovative design color matching. To achieve inheritance and innovation, we not only need our own innovative ability, but also need to achieve the functional transformation of its innovative design. We should learn from the successful cases of Taiwan literary creation to find our own way of development.

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