

Traditional Chinese Embroidery Motifs in Contemporary Apparel: Viewer Recognition, Design Fit, and Everyday Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese embroidery motifs are increasingly used in contemporary apparel, yet designer-led accounts provide limited evidence about how viewers judge whether these motifs remain recognisable, fit the apparel, or adapt to everyday wear. This exploratory cross-sectional image-elicitation survey used primarily quantitative descriptive analysis, supplemented by descriptive categorisation of one open-ended item. The 50 retained respondents formed a design-exposed convenience sample: 82% reported an art or design background. In the aggregate report, 76% considered the use of traditional motifs in contemporary apparel fairly or highly feasible, and 74% considered clear presentation of traditional motifs necessary. Item-specific responses also described perceived recognition, balance, placement, clarity, suitability, and motif distinctiveness across three non-standardised apparel images. The preliminary categorisation of 41 substantive open responses most frequently identified reduced motif scale, selective placement, restrained colour, lighter materials, and simplified apparel forms as possible routes to everyday use. The aggregate pattern places recognisable traditional reference alongside visual moderation, but it does not establish that the same respondents jointly endorsed both priorities. Because the study used a small, design-exposed sample, single-item measures, non-equivalent image questions, and open responses that require response-integrity verification, the findings are descriptive and cannot support causal, comparative, or population-level claims.

1. Introduction

Traditional embroidery is both a making practice and a visual system. Its stitches, materials, motif repertoires, colour relations, and compositional conventions have been transmitted through regional workshops, family practice, ceremonial use, and material

objects. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines safeguarding in terms that include transmission and revitalisation rather than the static preservation of an unchanged object (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2003). When embroidery motifs enter contemporary apparel, however, the issue is not only whether a traditional image remains visible. It is also whether viewers can recognise the cultural reference, judge its relation to the apparel as coherent, and imagine the design within current forms of dress.

This question matters because contemporary use can alter the mode through which heritage is encountered. Histories of Chinese dress show that clothing has repeatedly changed in relation to modernity, national identity, social distinction, and international exchange (Finnane, 2008; Steele & Major, 1999). The present circulation of embroidered dragons, phoenixes, floral motifs, cloud forms, and other traditional references should therefore not be treated as a simple continuation of historical dress. Motifs may be enlarged, fragmented, repositioned, recoloured, digitally reproduced, or detached from their original material and ceremonial settings. These operations can increase contemporary relevance, but they can also make the cultural reference generic or purely decorative.

Recent scholarship has begun to examine this problem from cultural, design, and consumer perspectives. A systematic review of traditional embroidery revival identified a need for more direct empirical and practice-oriented research rather than further general statements about preservation (Singh & Singh, 2025). Research on the New Chinese Style likewise shows that users do not interpret contemporary Chinese fashion uniformly: some emphasise cultural subjectivity, some accept adaptation to modern life, and others respond mainly to commercial symbols (Zhang & Yim, 2025). Studies of cultural and creative products have linked traditional symbols with cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention (Liu & Zhao, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Those models address market outcomes, but they do not isolate the more basic design judgments through which a motif is first recognised and assessed as fitting a particular apparel form.

Apparel-specific viewer research remains limited. Ravi and John (2026), for example, found that preferences for apparel featuring Indian tribal paintings varied across occupational and age groups. Their study demonstrates the value of obtaining viewer evidence, but it does not answer how traditional Chinese embroidery motifs are judged across recognition, placement, traditional-contemporary balance, and everyday adaptation. The present study addresses that narrower gap through an exploratory survey using three apparel images. It does not test an effect of motif visibility, identify purchase intention, or claim to represent the Chinese public. Its contribution is descriptive: it examines which aspects viewers notice and which design adjustments they associate with everyday use.

1.1. Embroidery Motifs Between Heritage and Contemporary Dress

Embroidery should not be reduced to an image applied to fabric. Its cultural significance can reside in the relation among motif, stitch, material, labour, regional knowledge, and social use. A motif may therefore continue visually while the associated making practice becomes less present. Conversely, a designer may retain a demanding embroidery technique while modifying the historical scale, placement, or symbolism. This distinction

is important for viewer research. A survey image can show the visible result of embroidery or an embroidery-related motif, but it cannot by itself verify stitch quality, authorship, labour conditions, regional provenance, or continuity of craft knowledge. Contemporary Chinese fashion intensifies this distinction because it operates within a history of repeated reinterpretation. Chinese dress has never been a fixed visual inventory, and modern fashion has repeatedly selected historical references to articulate changing identities (Finnane, 2008; Steele & Major, 1999). Recent New Chinese Style discourse continues this process. Zhang and Yim (2025) found that users valued both cultural specificity and compatibility with contemporary lifestyles, while also identifying superficial or commercially driven uses of traditional elements. The relevant analytical question is therefore not whether adaptation is present, but what is retained, what is changed, and what viewers can still recognise.

1.2. Visual Recognition and Design Fit

Design is encountered through attributed meaning rather than through formal properties alone. Krippendorff (2006) argues that artefacts become meaningful through the ways people interpret and use them. In apparel, a viewer sees the motif together with colour, silhouette, material, placement, styling, and photography. Recognition is therefore relational: the same motif may appear culturally explicit in one composition and visually recessive in another. Recognition also does not establish accurate knowledge of historical symbolism. A respondent may perceive a motif as traditional without being able to name it or explain its regional and symbolic context.

Product-form research similarly indicates that visual form contributes to consumers' cognitive and affective responses (Bloch, 1995). Processing-fluency research proposes that figure-ground contrast, prototypicality, and other properties that facilitate perception can contribute to positive aesthetic judgments (Reber et al., 2004). These concepts help distinguish two issues in the current survey. Visual recognition concerns whether the traditional reference remains perceptible. Design fit concerns whether the motif's scale, placement, intensity, and relation to the apparel appear coherent. The two may overlap, but they are not identical. A highly visible motif may be easy to recognise yet appear poorly integrated, whereas a selectively placed motif may be judged coherent but less immediately identifiable.

1.3. Everyday Adaptation as a Design Problem

Everyday adaptation introduces practical and social criteria that are not captured by motif recognition alone. Apparel must be imagined as wearable within particular settings, routines, body movements, climates, and norms of self-presentation. In research on intangible cultural heritage products, cultural identity and consumer knowledge can shape purchase intention, especially when manufacture type affects perceived scarcity and cultural expression (Zhang et al., 2023). The present study does not measure those constructs. It instead asks a prior design question: which visible adjustments make an embroidered cultural reference easier to imagine in everyday apparel?

This distinction also separates the study from research that models purchase intention. Liu and Zhao (2024) measured multiple dimensions of traditional-symbol metaphor design, customer experience, cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention using a substantially larger sample and a structural model. The current questionnaire

contains neither validated multi-item scales nor behavioural outcomes. Its evidence can identify recurrent viewer recommendations about motif scale, placement, colour, materials, and apparel form, but it cannot establish that these treatments increase purchase, cultural identification, or actual use.

1.4. Analytical Position

The study organises the questionnaire findings into three analytical domains: visual recognition, design fit, and everyday adaptation. These terms are interpretive labels for groups of survey items; they are not validated latent constructs or composite scales. Visual recognition covers the perceived clarity and distinctiveness of traditional motifs. Design fit covers placement, visual balance, and suitability within the apparel example. Everyday adaptation covers the open-ended treatments proposed for daily wear. This modest framework maintains alignment between the evidence and the claims while permitting a focused comparison with the literature.

1.5. Research Objectives and Questions

The study had three objectives. First, it examined respondents' general perceptions of the feasibility of using traditional Chinese embroidery motifs in contemporary apparel and the importance of retaining a clear traditional reference. Second, it described respondents' evaluations of motif recognition, visual balance, placement, clarity, contemporary suitability, and motif distinctiveness across three selected apparel examples. Third, it identified the design treatments respondents considered helpful for adapting traditional embroidery motifs to everyday apparel.

Accordingly, the research questions were: (RQ1) How do respondents perceive the feasibility and importance of retaining recognisable traditional Chinese embroidery motifs in contemporary apparel? (RQ2) How do respondents evaluate selected design attributes in three apparel examples? (RQ3) What design treatments do respondents identify as helpful for adapting traditional embroidery motifs to everyday apparel?

2. Research Methods

To align the evidence with the exploratory aims, the method was designed to elicit item-specific judgements rather than to estimate population preferences or compare the three images experimentally. The following subsections describe the survey design, participants, visual stimuli, questionnaire, measurement constraints, analysis, and response-quality assessment.

2.1. Research Design

The study used a primarily quantitative, exploratory cross-sectional image-elicitation survey, supplemented by descriptive categorisation of one short open-ended item. It was not treated as a formal mixed-methods study because the qualitative component was limited to a single supplementary question and was not developed as an independent qualitative strand. The images were not experimental conditions, respondents were not randomly assigned, and the study did not manipulate one design feature while holding others constant. Reporting was guided by the Consensus-Based Checklist for Reporting of Survey Studies, particularly its requirements to specify

recruitment, instrument content, data handling, and limits of inference (Sharma et al., 2021).

2.2. Participants and Recruitment

The questionnaire was administered through Wenjuanxing and circulated through WeChat using convenience recruitment. Fifty responses were retained for the reported analysis. Of these respondents, 41 (82%) reported an art or design background and nine (18%) did not. Thirty-two (64%) described themselves as familiar or very familiar with traditional Chinese embroidery. The sample included 11 participants aged 18-24 years, 18 aged 25-34, 12 aged 35-44, and nine aged 45 years or above. Occupational categories comprised students ($n = 2$), education-related roles ($n = 10$), design-related roles ($n = 15$), business or service roles ($n = 15$), and other roles ($n = 8$). The concentration of design exposure and embroidery familiarity is analytically important because it may have influenced motif judgments and the specificity of recommendations.

The survey opened on 20 November 2025, and responses were collected over three calendar days, ending on 22 November 2025. The WeChat invitation described the questionnaire as a voluntary and anonymous academic survey conducted as part of a doctoral study. Potential participants were informed that the survey would take approximately 5–7 minutes, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that their responses would be used only for academic research. Eligibility was limited to adults aged 18 years or above who voluntarily agreed to participate and were able to view the three apparel images and complete the questionnaire. No eligibility restrictions were imposed regarding occupation, art or design background, gender, or geographic location. The available Wenjuanxing report contained 50 completed submissions, all of which were retained for analysis; no exclusions were recorded in the available dataset. The respondents comprised 11 participants aged 18–24 years (22%), 18 aged 25–34 years (36%), 12 aged 35–44 years (24%), and nine aged 45 years or above (18%). Occupationally, two respondents were students (4%), 10 worked in education-related roles (20%), 15 in design-related roles (30%), 15 in business or service roles (30%), and eight in other occupations (16%). Gender and geographic location were not collected and therefore cannot be reported. All 50 retained questionnaires contained responses to the closed-ended items, giving an item-completion rate of 100% within the analysed sample. Because the invitation was circulated through WeChat contacts and the number of people who viewed or received the invitation was not recorded, a recruitment response rate could not be calculated.

2.3. Visual Stimuli

Three images of contemporary apparel incorporating traditional Chinese embroidery motifs or embroidery-related visual references were presented as Images A, B, and C. The examples differed in overall apparel type, motif density, colour, placement, silhouette, and photographic presentation. Image A presented a visually extensive embroidered treatment; Image C used a more restrained treatment; Image B provided a further configuration of placement and clarity. These descriptions are not exposure levels and do not define an ordered experimental sequence.

Because each image was followed by different evaluation items, the survey cannot determine which image performed best or attribute differences to motif visibility alone. Brand recognition, model, lighting, colour, apparel category, styling, and image

composition are plausible co-determinants of the responses. The images functioned as prompts for situated judgments rather than as standardised stimuli.

Figure 1: The Three Apparel Images Presented to Respondents in the Questionnaire



Note. (A) Guo Pei, Chinese Wedding Dresses and Haute Couture (2014); (B) NE·TIGER, Huafu Four Seasons: Winter couture presentation (2025); and (C) Shiatzy Chen, Voice Collection embroidered silk dress (2022), product no. 633674 Y.

2.4. Questionnaire

The questionnaire contained 15 questions. Questions 1-4 collected respondent background information. Questions 5-8 addressed general perceptions of traditional motifs in contemporary apparel, including feasibility, visually attractive features, preferred motif categories, and the perceived need to present traditional motifs clearly. Questions 9-14 asked respondents to evaluate different attributes of Images A-C, including recognition, traditional-contemporary balance, placement, clarity, contemporary suitability, and motif distinctiveness. Question 15 asked which design treatments would help integrate traditional embroidery motifs into everyday apparel.

The closed evaluative questions used five-point Likert-type response options. They were treated as individual ordinal items rather than combined into a single scale because they addressed different concepts and, for Questions 9-14, different images. This distinction follows the difference between a single Likert-type item and a multi-item scale (Sullivan & Artino, 2013). No total score or composite mean was calculated.

The administered Question 15 asked respondents which design treatments would most help traditional embroidery motifs integrate into everyday apparel. The analysis therefore concerns everyday adaptation; it does not measure whether cultural meaning was preserved beyond decoration.

2.5. Instrument Quality and Measurement Limits

The questionnaire was purpose-built for this exploratory study rather than adapted from a validated psychometric scale. Internal-consistency coefficients such as Cronbach's alpha or McDonald's omega were not calculated because the Likert-type items assessed distinct attributes across different visual stimuli and were not designed as indicators of one latent construct. Combining them would therefore lack conceptual and statistical justification. Factor analysis was also inappropriate because the items were non-equivalent, mostly single-item measures, and the sample was too small to support a stable latent structure. The items should therefore be treated as study-specific measures rather than as a validated measurement scale. The administered Chinese-language version constituted the basis of the analysis, while the English wording presented in this article was prepared for reporting purposes only.

2.6. Data Analysis

Closed-ended responses were summarised using frequencies and percentages. For each five-point ordinal item, all response categories were reported as *n* (%), together with the median (Mdn) and the observed 25th–75th percentile category range Q1 – Q3. The positive-response percentage for item *i* was calculated as:

$$P_{i,+} = \frac{n_{i,4} + n_{i,5}}{N_i} \times 100\%$$

where $n_{i,4}$ and $n_{i,5}$ denote the numbers of retained responses in categories 4 and 5, respectively, and N_i denotes the total number of valid responses to item *i*. Categories 4 and 5 represented positive responses according to the response options used for the corresponding item. Because participants were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling, the resulting percentages describe only the retained sample and were not treated as population estimates. No composite scores, null-hypothesis significance tests, correlations, regressions, or inferential between-image comparisons were conducted.

2.7. Data Screening and Response-Quality Assessment

Before analysis, the retained questionnaire records were reviewed for completeness, non-substantive responses, exact or closely similar wording, and temporal clustering of submissions. The available export contained 50 responses to Question 15. Nine responses consisted only of “none,” “no suggestion,” or an equivalent statement. These responses were retained when describing item completion but were recorded separately and excluded from the development of substantive response categories.

Exact or closely similar wording and short intervals between submissions were treated as indicators requiring further examination rather than as sufficient evidence of duplicate participation. No response was excluded solely on either basis. Because the available records did not include the complete respondent-level export, questionnaire completion durations, recruitment logs, or device- and IP-based identifiers, participant independence could not be assessed using these indicators. Accordingly, all 50 retained responses were included in the descriptive analysis, whereas the content categorisation was based on the 41 substantive responses. This limitation was considered when interpreting the reported frequencies and category counts.

3. Results

The results are reported in the same order as the research questions and remain descriptive throughout. This section first characterises the retained sample, then presents general perceptions, image-specific evaluations, and the preliminary categorisation of suggestions for everyday adaptation.

3.1. Respondent Profile

The reported dataset contained 50 retained responses. The most consequential sample feature was the concentration of respondents with art or design experience: 41 respondents (82%) reported such a background. In addition, 32 respondents (64%) reported being familiar or very familiar with traditional Chinese embroidery. The results therefore describe a design-exposed and relatively familiar convenience sample rather than a general-public population.

Table 1: Respondent Profile

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	18-24 years	11	22
Age	25-34 years	18	36
Age	35-44 years	12	24
Age	45 years or above	9	18
Occupation	Student	2	4
Occupation	Education-related	10	20
Occupation	Design-related	15	30
Occupation	Business/service	15	30
Occupation	Other	8	16
Art or design background	Yes	41	82
Art or design background	No	9	18

Note. Percentages are based on the 50 retained responses. Recruitment and exclusion details remain subject to verification against the complete export and study record.

3.2. General Perceptions of Traditional Motifs

Thirty-eight respondents (76%) considered the incorporation of traditional Chinese embroidery motifs into contemporary apparel fairly feasible or highly feasible. Thirty-seven (74%) considered it necessary or very necessary to present traditional motifs clearly. Both items had a median response of 4. This aggregate pattern records favourable responses to contemporary feasibility and visual recognisability, but individual-level data are required to determine whether the same respondents endorsed both positions.

Table 2: Five-Category Distributions for General Likert-Type Items

Item	1 n (%)	2 n (%)	3 n (%)	4 n (%)	5 n (%)	Median (P25-P75)
Embroidery familiarity (Q4)	3 (6)	6 (12)	9 (18)	22 (44)	10 (20)	4 (3-4)
Feasibility of contemporary use (Q6)	4 (8)	2 (4)	6 (12)	17 (34)	21 (42)	4 (4-5)
Need for clear traditional presentation (Q8)	4 (8)	4 (8)	5 (10)	15 (30)	22 (44)	4 (3-5)

Note. Categories 1-5 reproduce the ordered response options from least to most favourable. P25-P75 reports the observed 25th-75th percentile response categories.

For motif preference, floral and botanical motifs were selected by 17 respondents (34%) and geometric or abstract motifs by 16 (32%); the two-percentage-point difference does not support a claim that floral motifs were clearly dominant. On the multiple-response attraction item, craft detail was selected by 25 respondents (50%), the motif itself by 24 (48%), colour by 22 (44%), cultural meaning by 20 (40%), and overall apparel style by 19 (38%).

Table 3: Motif Preferences and Attractive Features

Item	Response category	n	%
Preferred motif category (Q5)	Floral/botanical	17	34
Preferred motif category (Q5)	Animal/mythical	9	18
Preferred motif category (Q5)	Geometric/abstract	16	32
Preferred motif category (Q5)	Celestial/religious/figure-related	8	16
Attractive feature (Q7)*	Motif itself	24	48
Attractive feature (Q7)*	Colour	22	44
Attractive feature (Q7)*	Craft detail	25	50
Attractive feature (Q7)*	Cultural meaning	20	40
Attractive feature (Q7)*	Overall apparel style	19	38

*Note. *Multiple responses were permitted for Question 7; those percentages therefore do not sum to 100%. Question 5 required one response.*

3.3. Image-Based Evaluations

For Image A, 34 respondents (68%) reported that the motif was easy to recognise, and 36 (72%) judged the relation between traditional and contemporary expression to be balanced. For Image B, 32 respondents (64%) considered the motif placement appropriate, while 34 (68%) considered the motif clear. For Image C, 35 respondents (70%) considered the design suitable for contemporary apparel, and 35 (70%) considered the traditional motif visually strong. Each item had a median response of 4.

These values describe responses to different questions attached to different images. They cannot be used to rank the images or to infer that one configuration caused a stronger response. The result for each image is limited to the attribute that respondents were asked to judge.

Table 4: Five-Category Distributions for the Image-Based Items

Item	Attribute	1 n (%)	2 n (%)	3 n (%)	4 n (%)	5 n (%)	Median (P25-P75)
A/Q9	Motif recognition	4 (8)	5 (10)	7 (14)	11 (22)	23 (46)	4 (3-5)
A/Q10	Traditional-contemporary balance	5 (10)	2 (4)	7 (14)	16 (32)	20 (40)	4 (3-5)
B/Q11	Motif placement	6 (12)	5 (10)	7 (14)	12 (24)	20 (40)	4 (3-5)
B/Q12	Motif clarity	7 (14)	4 (8)	5 (10)	10 (20)	24 (48)	4 (3-5)
C/Q13	Contemporary suitability	4 (8)	4 (8)	7 (14)	16 (32)	19 (38)	4 (3-5)
C/Q14	Motif visual strength	7 (14)	4 (8)	4 (8)	14 (28)	21 (42)	4 (3-5)

Note. Categories 1-5 reproduce the ordered response options from least to most favourable. Each image was assessed using different items; no between-image comparison is valid.

3.4. Preliminary Suggested Treatments for Everyday Adaptation

Subject to response-integrity verification, 41 records contained a substantive suggestion, while nine stated that no suggestion was offered. The largest preliminary category concerned motif scale, simplification, and selective placement ($n = 15$). These respondents proposed smaller motifs, partial rather than extensive coverage, or the use of motifs as localised accents. Eleven responses concerned contemporary aesthetics, minimal silhouettes, or casual apparel forms. Nine focused on lighter materials, subtle woven or embroidered effects, or combinations of embroidery and print. Six recommended low-saturation, restrained, or gradient colour treatments.

Table 5: Preliminary Categories in the Open Responses

Primary category	Examples of treatment	n	% of total sample
Motif scale, simplification, and selective placement	Smaller scale; partial use; local accents	15	30
Contemporary aesthetics and apparel form	Minimal silhouette; casual cut; simplified styling	11	22
Materials and technique	Lighter fabric; subtle texture; embroidery-print combination	9	18
Colour moderation	Low saturation; restrained palette; gradient colour	6	12

Primary category	Examples of treatment	n	% of total sample
No suggestion	None stated	9	18
Total		50	100

Note. These frequencies are provisional pending response-integrity verification and a documented categorisation audit trail. Each record was assigned to one primary category; the frequencies do not indicate the relative effectiveness of the treatments.

4. Discussion

The chapter considers what the descriptive patterns can and cannot establish. It first distinguishes aggregate recognisability from visual moderation and recognition from design fit, then examines the provisional adaptation recommendations in relation to existing research, alternative explanations, and implications for future design studies.

4.1. Aggregate Recognisability and Moderation Should Not Be Conflated

The main aggregate pattern places two observations side by side. First, 74% considered clear presentation of traditional motifs necessary or very necessary. Second, the provisional open-response categories most often concerned reduced scale, selective placement, simplified apparel forms, lighter materials, and restrained colour. This pattern is compatible with the possibility that recognisability and visual moderation can coexist as design priorities. It does not show that the same respondents jointly held both views because individual-level cross-tabulation was unavailable, and it cannot be treated as a confirmed finding until the open-response records have passed response-integrity verification.

If verified, the pattern would be consistent with recent accounts of the New Chinese Style in which users seek both cultural specificity and compatibility with contemporary life (Zhang & Yim, 2025). It also adds a more concrete design vocabulary to that broad cultural position. Respondents did not refer only to 'innovation' or 'modernity'; they identified operations that designers can locate on the apparel surface and silhouette. Visual recognition in this study is recognition of a traditional reference, not demonstrated knowledge of its symbolism.

4.2. Recognition and Design Fit Are Conceptually Distinct

The image-based results show why recognition and design fit should not be collapsed. Image A received positive responses for motif recognition and traditional-contemporary balance; Image B for placement and clarity; and Image C for contemporary suitability and motif distinctiveness. Each result indicates that viewers can make differentiated judgments about how a motif appears within apparel. This is compatible with design-semantics arguments that meaning arises through the relation between an artefact and those who interpret it (Krippendorff, 2006), as well as with research linking product form to cognitive and affective responses (Bloch, 1995).

The data do not show that higher recognition caused stronger perceptions of balance or suitability. Nor do they establish an optimal degree of motif visibility. Processing fluency may help explain why clarity and figure-ground organisation contribute to positive

judgments (Reber et al., 2004), but that mechanism was not measured. Cultural familiarity, prior exposure to Chinese motifs, design training, and the overall styling of each image offer equally plausible explanations. Accordingly, the results support a distinction among attributes, not a psychological causal model.

4.3. Provisional Adaptation Recommendations Emphasised Visual Moderation

Subject to verification, the open responses translate an abstract demand for modernisation into five practical design dimensions: motif scale, placement, apparel form, material treatment, and colour. The largest category combined smaller scale with simplification and localised placement. This does not mean that small motifs are universally preferable. It indicates that the respondents most often imagined everyday use through a reduction in visual coverage or intensity. The second category located adaptation in the apparel itself through minimal or casual forms, showing that motif transformation cannot be separated from silhouette and use context.

Material and colour recommendations further qualify the idea of visual moderation. Suggestions for lighter fabrics, subtle textures, and embroidery-print combinations potentially reduce bulk, cost, or ceremonial appearance, while low-saturation palettes may make motifs less visually dominant. These strategies could broaden use, but they also introduce risks. Simplification can remove diagnostic motif features; print can reproduce an image while displacing embroidery knowledge; and restrained colour can weaken historically significant colour relations. The design implication is therefore conditional: moderation should be evaluated against what remains culturally identifiable, not treated as an automatic improvement.

4.4. Relation to Consumer and Apparel-Preference Research

The present findings should be distinguished from consumer research on traditional cultural products. Liu and Zhao (2024) and Zhang et al. (2023) examined purchase intention using multi-item measures of constructs such as cultural identity, cultural knowledge, perceived value, and manufacturing type. The current survey measured neither these constructs nor purchase intention and therefore cannot confirm or extend the relationships proposed in those studies. Its narrower contribution lies in describing respondents' evaluations of visible, apparel-specific design attributes, including motif recognition, placement, compositional balance, and perceived suitability. Although the visual recognition and interpretation of a motif may be theoretically relevant to subsequent consumer evaluations, the present study did not test any temporal or causal pathway linking these judgments to cultural identity, perceived value, or purchase intention.

The study is methodologically closer to Ravi and John's (2026) investigation of viewer preferences for apparel incorporating Indian tribal paintings, as both studies used apparel examples to elicit evaluations of traditional visual elements. The present study differs by examining recognition, placement, balance, and suitability through separate questionnaire items and by collecting open-ended recommendations for design adaptation. These items should not, however, be interpreted as validated dimensions or composite constructs. Moreover, the high proportion of respondents with prior exposure to art or design limits demographic comparison and broader generalisation. Such exposure may have influenced both the evaluations and the specificity of the open-

ended recommendations, but its direction and magnitude cannot be determined without an appropriate comparison group.

4.5. Alternative Explanations and Limitations

The small convenience sample, dominated by respondents with art or design backgrounds (82%) and familiarity with Chinese embroidery (64%), limits generalisability. The questionnaire used single-item measures, while the three images differed in several uncontrolled visual features and were assessed using different questions. Direct comparison and attribution to specific design features are therefore not supported. The brief open responses were assigned to one primary category, reducing overlap among recommendations. Favourable evaluations may consequently reflect participants' prior experience or the overall presentation of the images.

4.6. Design and Research Implications

If the open-response records are verified, the findings suggest a practical sequence for design development. Designers can first identify which motif features must remain recognisable; then test changes in scale and placement; coordinate those changes with silhouette, material, and colour; and finally obtain viewer judgments for both cultural recognition and everyday suitability. The sequence avoids assuming that maximum motif visibility or maximum simplification is inherently preferable.

Future research should use controlled visual stimuli in which one attribute is varied at a time. A factorial design could manipulate motif scale, placement, colour intensity, and technique while holding apparel type, model, and photography constant. A larger sample should include sufficient numbers of design-trained and non-design-trained participants to estimate group differences. Validated multi-item measures could distinguish motif recognition, perceived cultural authenticity, design coherence, wearability, and purchase intention. Interviews or think-aloud viewing could then examine why a treatment is read as traditional, contemporary, ceremonial, or suitable for daily use.

5. Conclusion

This exploratory study provides empirical evidence on how a design-exposed group evaluated traditional Chinese embroidery motifs at the level of visible apparel attributes. Most respondents regarded the contemporary use of these motifs as feasible and considered the clear presentation of traditional references important. Across the three apparel examples, respondents evaluated motif recognition, placement, visual balance, clarity, contemporary suitability, and motif distinctiveness as related but non-equivalent aspects of apparel design.

The study makes two specific contributions. First, it distinguishes motif recognisability from design fit, thereby avoiding the assumption that greater motif visibility necessarily produces stronger visual integration or contemporary suitability. Second, the open-ended responses translate the broad idea of "modernising" traditional motifs into five design dimensions that can be examined more precisely: motif scale, placement, apparel form, material treatment, and colour. This design-level account complements consumer research centred on cultural identity, perceived value, and purchase intention by identifying the visible decisions through which traditional references are presented and evaluated in apparel.

These findings are limited to a small, design-exposed convenience sample and do not establish optimal design treatments or wider consumer preferences. Future research should examine the identified design considerations using standardised visual stimuli and more diverse samples to clarify how traditional embroidery motifs are recognised and evaluated in contemporary apparel.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval was granted by Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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