

A STUDY ON THE DESIGN STRATEGY OF SUZHOU TOURIST SOUVENIRS INCORPORATING ELEMENTS OF WU CULTURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL SEMIOTICS

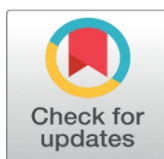
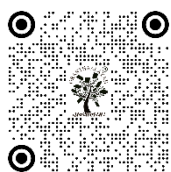
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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the design of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs within the context of Wu culture, employing a comprehensive approach that integrates field research, interviews, and case analysis to thoroughly examine tourist perceptions, industry challenges, and pathways for design innovation. The findings reveal that while tourists have limited understanding of the cultural essence of Wu culture, there is a strong demand for it. Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs have room for improvement in terms of price, patterns, craftsmanship, and design concepts. By extracting symbols of Wu culture and integrating them into modern design to strengthen cultural identity, the study proposes a sustainable development model from multiple dimensions, including cultural preservation and socio-economic development. This provides theoretical and practical guidance for the design of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs, promoting the integration of Wu cultural heritage and the tourism industry.

Keywords: Wu Culture, Suzhou Embroidery, Souvenir Design, Cultural Heritage, Cultural Symbols

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1. INTRODUCTION

Wu culture, as an important branch of Chinese civilisation, has a long and rich history, spanning the regions of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shanghai along the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Beginning with Tai Bo's migration to Wu,

which marked the dawn of a new chapter in Jiangnan civilisation, the culture has evolved over thousands of years, forming a cultural system centred on the 'Zhi De' spirit, integrating diverse characteristics such as rice-fishing culture, bronze culture, and commercial culture. Within Wu culture, Tai Bo's 'three refusals of the throne' exemplify humility, inclusivity, integrity, and practicality, profoundly influencing the formation of regional values. This has shaped the moral and literary standards of Jiangnan scholars and the tradition of conducting business with integrity among modern industrialists and merchants.

Suzhou embroidery, as an outstanding representative of Wu culture, is renowned worldwide for its exquisite and elegant craftsmanship and beautiful patterns. It is not merely a traditional craft but also a direct expression of the aesthetic sensibilities and philosophical outlook of the people of the Wu region. In terms of stitching techniques, Suzhou embroidery emphasises flatness, evenness, fineness, density, uniformity, smoothness, harmony, and lustre. A single silk thread can be split into dozens of strands, which are skillfully woven together by the embroiderers to create vivid and lifelike scenes, reflecting the Wu culture's pursuit of exquisite and delicate craftsmanship. The patterns cover a wide range of subjects, from flowers, birds, fish, and insects to landscapes and figures, all drawn from the natural scenery and humanistic life of the Wu region. They carry profound cultural meanings, such as the peony symbolising wealth and the mandarin duck representing love, conveying the people of the Wu region's aspirations for a better life.

In the current boom of the tourism industry, tourist souvenirs serve as an important medium for disseminating regional culture, and their design and development have garnered significant attention. Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs, with their unique cultural charm, have become an important choice for tourists to understand Wu culture and preserve their travel memories. However, currently, such souvenirs lack cultural expression, design innovation, and industrial synergy in the market. Additionally, due to the rising cost of labour for embroiderers, these souvenirs are expensive, making it difficult to fully meet tourists' cultural consumption needs. Conducting in-depth research into the essence of Wu culture, exploring the artistic value of Suzhou embroidery, and seeking innovative design approaches hold significant practical significance for enhancing the quality of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs, promoting the inheritance of Wu culture, and driving the high-quality development of the tourism industry.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To Exploring the living heritage and innovative expression of Wu culture.
- 2) To research connection between Suzhou embroidery souvenirs and "Wu culture".
- 3) To design a series of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs that meet modern aesthetic and practical needs combining Chinese painting, hand-pushed embroidery, and hand embroidery techniques, as well as various cultural expression methods in cloth bag design. Design a website to protect intangible cultural heritage, promote cultural inheritance, popularise Suzhou embroidery, and enhance the local tourism economy.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, significant progress has been made in the design of cultural tourism souvenirs and research related to Wu culture. In terms of cultural tourism souvenir design theory, scholars have pointed out that the extraction and transformation of cultural elements are key processes. For example, by encoding cultural symbols such as regional architectural styles and folk patterns, a design element library can be created to revitalise traditional culture in modern products [Huang \(2024\)](#). Enriching product forms and cultural experiences while breaking free from traditional design constraints.

Regarding the study of Wu culture, many scholars have focused on its origins, developmental trajectory, and core spirit. Tai Bo's flight to Wu played a foundational role in the formation of Wu culture. The fusion of Central Plains civilisation and local Jiangnan culture brought by Tai Bo (1123 BC) shaped the unique character of Wu culture, with the 'Zhi De' spirit becoming the core value of Wu culture, permeating various aspects such as social governance and people's daily lives [Chen and Yao \(2023\)](#). Wu culture has played a significant role in the economic, social, and cultural development of the Jiangnan region, fostering regional cultural traits such as a reverence for education and openness, thereby providing a powerful spiritual driving force for local development.

In the field of Suzhou embroidery research, existing studies have primarily focused on the inheritance and preservation of embroidery techniques, with in-depth exploration of technical aspects such as embroidery stitches,

colour application, and pattern design. These studies emphasize the challenges faced by traditional techniques in the modern context, including a shortage of skilled artisans and market pressures. However, from a broader perspective of Wu culture, there is a relative lack of systematic research on the design of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs, particularly in areas such as the extraction and innovative application of cultural symbols, as well as the mechanisms for integrating souvenir design with the tourism industry. This study will build on existing research to conduct in-depth exploration and address these gaps.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. In terms of qualitative analysis, traditional handicrafts and cultural connotations were documented through field observations and interviews with practitioners of Suzhou embroidery culture. In terms of quantitative analysis, we distributed a structured questionnaire to 406 participants, including 122 students, 142 government/public institution employees, and 142 business professionals, to assess the appeal of Suzhou tourism products and Suzhou embroidery products, using the Likert scale for measurement. Subsequently, we used descriptive statistical data to summarise participants' feedback to guide subsequent design.

4.2. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study comprehensively employs primary and secondary sources to explore design strategies for Suzhou tourism souvenirs incorporating elements of Wu culture from a cultural semiotics perspective. Primary sources were obtained through on-site visits to the Suzhou Museum and tourist attractions, observing visitor feedback on existing tourism souvenirs, and conducting in-depth interviews with traditional Suzhou artisans, souvenir designers, tourism professionals, and cultural heritage custodians to gather first-hand information on the application of Wu cultural symbols, visitor preferences, and challenges in design practice. Secondary data includes historical texts on Wu culture, local documents, folklore studies, and academic papers on cultural semiotics and tourist souvenir design from both domestic and international sources. These provide theoretical support and historical context for analysing the symbolic connotations, evolutionary trajectories, and design application trends of Wu cultural elements. This organic integration of multi-dimensional data enables a comprehensive exploration of the value of Wu cultural elements in Suzhou tourism souvenir design from both practical and theoretical perspectives, thereby aiding in the development of design strategies with greater cultural depth and market competitiveness.

4.3. DATA COLLECTION

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research to comprehensively and deeply analyse the application strategies of Wu cultural elements in the design of Suzhou tourist souvenirs from a cultural semiotics perspective. In the qualitative research phase, field investigations were conducted at representative cultural sites and areas such as the Suzhou Museum, the Wu Culture Museum, the Suzhou Embroidery Museum, Suzhou Embroidery Street, and Pingjiang Road, as well as well-known local tourist souvenir shops in Suzhou. The study observed the forms and application scenarios of Wu cultural elements in existing souvenirs. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with scholars specialising in Wu culture research, cultural inheritors of Suzhou embroidery, and tourist souvenir designers. These interview participants were carefully selected based on their expertise in Wu culture, their ability to inherit and innovate traditional crafts, to deeply explore the symbolic meaning, cultural connotations, and application challenges and innovative ideas of Wu cultural elements in souvenir design. Additionally, local annals, Wu culture-related classics, and academic research articles were referenced to supplement the historical context and cultural heritage of Wu culture development.

In terms of quantitative research, a structured questionnaire was designed and administered to 406 participants, including tourists visiting Suzhou, consumers of tourist souvenirs, and experts. The participants represented diverse age groups, professions, and regional backgrounds, constituting the potential user base for Suzhou tourist souvenirs. The questionnaire focused on the cultural distinctiveness, artistic aesthetic appeal, and purchasing intent of Wu cultural elements in souvenir design, using the Likert scale for assessment. By calculating descriptive statistics such as mean and

standard deviation, the study analysed participants' overall acceptance of souvenirs incorporating Wu cultural elements, identified strengths and areas for improvement in design, and provided data support for the development of Suzhou souvenir design strategies.

4.4. DATA COLLECTION

Rooted in Wu culture, this study uses Suzhou embroidery as a cultural medium, constructing a research framework from three dimensions: tourists, cultural inheritors and designers, and industrial development. The tourist dimension focuses on their perception and demand for Wu culture and embroidery souvenirs; the cultural heritage bearers and designers dimension centres on their assessment of the current state of souvenir design and their visions for future development; the industrial development dimension revolves around souvenir design innovation, industrial integration, and sustainable development. Through cross-analysis of these dimensions, this study explores effective pathways for Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenir design in terms of cultural heritage preservation, meeting market demand, and industrial upgrading, and designs a series of tourist products.

4.5. DATA ANALYSIS

4.5.1. DATA COLLECTION

Conducting on-site research to document the current state of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs: Take detailed photographs of various types of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs available in the market, record product dimensions, materials, patterns, and craftsmanship details, observe product packaging design and price tag information, and analyse how product display methods attract tourists' attention.

Collecting information on Wu culture and Suzhou embroidery: Review historical texts and research works on Wu culture to trace its development and core spiritual essence; collect literature on the inheritance of Suzhou embroidery techniques, Suzhou embroidery craftsmanship, and Suzhou embroidery production processes to provide a theoretical foundation for subsequent research.

Exchange with Suzhou embroidery art experts: Organise expert symposiums, inviting embroidery masters, cultural scholars, design experts, etc. to participate, and conduct in-depth discussions on issues such as cultural inheritance and development, and cultural symbol expression in the design of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs, and record the experts' views and suggestions.

Data collection from field research, literature, and expert discussions: Field observation records, interview content, questionnaire survey data, and literature materials were organised and categorised. Quantitative data from the questionnaire survey was statistically analysed using SPSS software to calculate statistical indicators such as frequency, percentage, and mean value, revealing the patterns behind the data.

Develop design guidelines for Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs: Based on the results of data analysis, develop detailed design guidelines covering aspects such as cultural element extraction, pattern design principles, craft selection and innovation, design concept updates, and product evaluation standards, to provide operational guidelines for souvenir design practices.

Presentation of research findings on Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenir design: Present research findings in the form of design case studies, design manuals, website promotions, e-books, etc., using text and images to explain innovative ideas and practical methods for Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenir design, providing reference examples for industry practitioners.

The following research methods were used to conduct a satisfaction survey on Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenir designs:

Sample selection: From among the tourists who participated in the questionnaire survey, 406 people were selected as the satisfaction survey sample through stratified sampling based on factors such as age, gender, and region to ensure that the sample was representative.

Research tools: Design a special satisfaction survey questionnaire covering aspects such as the appearance design, cultural connotation, craftsmanship quality, price reasonableness, and practicality of souvenirs. Use a 5-point Likert scale scoring method for easy quantitative analysis.

Data analysis: Statistical software was used to analyse the questionnaire data, calculate the mean and standard deviation of each evaluation indicator, and draw a satisfaction radar chart to visually display tourists' satisfaction with the design of Suzhou embroidery souvenirs. Based on the analysis results, the design guidelines were further optimised.

4.5.2. THE DESIGN PROCESS OF SUZHOU EMBROIDERY SOUVENIRS

Analysing the cultural elements and design characteristics of Suzhou embroidery artworks: Select representative classic Suzhou embroidery works and conduct an in-depth analysis from aspects such as pattern themes, colour coordination, needlework techniques, and compositional forms. Utilise image recognition technology and colour analysis software to quantitatively analyse the frequency of pattern elements and colour harmony relationships, and uncover the underlying Wu cultural connotations and aesthetic concepts embedded in the works.

Attempting to design souvenirs suitable for market demand based on artistic style: Based on prior research, focus on affordable, practical souvenirs such as canvas bags.

Present the results of data analysis and research findings in the form of illustrations and design proposals: Present the analysis of cultural elements, the design process, and the final design proposals in an intuitive manner through illustrations, accompanied by textual explanations of design concepts, cultural connotations, and production methods, to form a comprehensive collection of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenir design proposals, providing visual references for industrial applications.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

5.1. TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WU CULTURE AND THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

Understanding the historical and cultural significance of Wu culture: Surveys show that over 70% of tourists are familiar with the name 'Wu culture,' but only about 30% can accurately explain its origins and core spirit. Most tourists have heard of historical stories such as Tai Bo's flight to Wu and the Wu-Yue rivalry, but their understanding of the profound influence of Wu culture on social life, economic development, and artistic creation in the Jiangnan region is limited. During their travels, tourists primarily engage with Wu culture through visits to museums and historical sites, but their understanding of its cultural essence often remains superficial, lacking in depth.

Assessment of the value of Wu culture and Suzhou embroidery to the tourism industry: Over 85% of tourists believe that Wu culture enriches their travel experience and enhances the appeal of tourist destinations. Suzhou embroidery, as a iconic element of Wu culture, is viewed by 90% of tourists as a representative choice for tourist souvenirs. Tourists generally acknowledge the exquisite craftsmanship and beautiful patterns of Suzhou embroidery, believing it effectively embodies the refined and delicate characteristics of Wu culture. They have a high willingness to purchase embroidery souvenirs, particularly those that combine cultural significance with practical functionality.

Issues Faced by Suzhou Embroidery in Tourism Industry Development: Tourists have feedback that Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs in the market suffer from severe product homogenisation, with over 60% of tourists believing that souvenirs from different scenic spots are highly similar and lack uniqueness. Additionally, some products have rough craftsmanship, failing to showcase the refined and elegant essence of Suzhou embroidery techniques; in terms of pricing, some products are overpriced, with prices not matching their quality, affecting tourists' purchasing decisions; in terms of cultural expression, some souvenirs merely replicate embroidery patterns without delving into their cultural significance, making it difficult to evoke emotional resonance among tourists.

5.2. VIEWS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE RESEARCHERS AND DESIGNERS ON THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF SOUVENIR DESIGN

Advantages of Suzhou Embroidery-Related Tourist Souvenir Product Design in the Context of Wu Culture: Cultural inheritors and designers alike agree that the rich heritage of Wu culture provides a wealth of inspiration for the design of Suzhou embroidery tourist souvenirs. As a national-level intangible cultural heritage, Suzhou embroidery possesses exceptional artistic value and brand influence, enjoying widespread recognition both domestically and internationally. Additionally, Suzhou's well-developed cultural tourism industry infrastructure provides extensive sales channels and a large pool of potential customers for embroidery souvenirs.

The incorporation of Wu cultural symbols in the design of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs: They pointed out that the current application of Wu cultural symbols in souvenir design suffers from issues of simplification and fragmentation. It is necessary to conduct in-depth research into the Wu cultural symbol system, such as incorporating abstract elements like the spatial layout of Suzhou gardens and watertown living scenes into designs. Through innovative design techniques, cultural symbols should be organically integrated with embroidery techniques to enhance the cultural depth and artistic appeal of souvenirs. In pattern design, emphasis should be placed on storytelling and narrative expression, allowing tourists to experience the lifestyle and humanistic emotions behind Wu culture through souvenirs.

The integration of Wu cultural symbols with Chinese painting: In the design of Chinese painting-style embroidered souvenirs, select Wu-region-specific themes such as flowers, birds, and fish. First, create a Chinese painting with Chinese characteristics, then use modern technology to produce large-scale flat-stitch embroidery through hand-pushed embroidery techniques, and finally employ the unique needlework techniques of Suzhou embroidery to delicately capture the brushwork and ink nuances of Chinese painting. Achieving innovative integration of multiple elements of Wu culture to create tourist souvenirs with a unique cultural identity.

5.3. SUZHOU EMBROIDERY TOURIST SOUVENIRS CONTINUE TO IMPROVE

Pattern Design: Drawing inspiration from the cultural essence of Wu culture, innovative pattern designs have been created. Develop a series of patterns themed around flowers, birds, and fish from the Wu region, reflecting the water town culture and fish and rice culture of Wu culture. These patterns are presented using delicate embroidery techniques, showcasing the distinctive features of Wu civilization. Combining Chinese painting techniques with physical patterns and traditional embroidery patterns, the designs highlight Chinese characteristics, Wu regional characteristics, and Suzhou characteristics while also aligning with modern aesthetic preferences and the purchasing power of the general public.

Craftsmanship Enhancement: Deepening the inheritance and innovation of traditional embroidery techniques, integrating hand-painted art with manual embroidery skills. Drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese painting, 18 hand-painted patterns featuring flowers, birds, and fish with an Eastern aesthetic are meticulously rendered on canvas bags, serving as the blueprint for embroidery creation. Hand-pushed embroidery techniques were used to highlight key areas, setting a dynamic tone for the work. Skilled embroiderers then performed the hand embroidery, employing various specialised techniques such as seed stitch embroidery and lock stitch embroidery to skillfully handle different elements of the design. During the creation process, the embroiderers broke free from the limitations of traditional needlework techniques, experimenting with innovative needlework combinations. They used seed stitch embroidery to depict the texture of the fish's eyes, infusing traditional embroidery techniques with new artistic brilliance on the canvas bags.

Design Philosophy: Adhering to the design philosophy of 'culture as the soul, creativity as the core, and practicality as the foundation.' Deeply exploring the spiritual essence of Wu culture, the design conveys cultural value through patterns, colours, and material selection, breaking away from traditional thinking. It combines modern lifestyles and aesthetic trends to develop innovative product forms.

Product Evaluation: A scientific product evaluation system has been established to assess souvenirs from multiple dimensions, including cultural connotations, design creativity, craftsmanship quality, and market acceptance. A evaluation team comprising cultural experts, design experts, and consumer representatives has been formed to score and evaluate design proposals and finished products.

5.4. SUZHOU EMBROIDERY TOURIST SOUVENIRS CONTINUE TO IMPROVE

5.4.1. CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Through symbol decoding and translation, cultural symbols such as Wu-style gardens and Suzhou embroidery are precisely integrated into the design to preserve the cultural core.

5.4.2. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In terms of environmental protection, low-carbon production and ecological materials are used to reduce negative impacts on the environment.

5.4.3. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Promote industrial upgrading through distinctive souvenirs, create jobs, and increase residents' income.

The research findings provide innovative strategies for the design of Suzhou's tourism souvenirs and offer theoretical and practical references for the integration of cultural heritage protection and the tourism industry.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Innovative Design of Suzhou Tourism Products: The 'Flower Series' and Pattern Sources

Source: Illustrated by the Author (15 June 2025)

Figure 2



Figure 2 Innovative Design of Suzhou Tourism Products, The 'Bird Series' and the Source of the Patterns

Source: Illustrated By the Author (15 June 2025)

Figure 3



Figure 3 Innovative Design of Suzhou Tourism Products, The 'Fish Series' and the Source of the Patterns
Source: Illustrated by the Author (15 June 2025)

Figure 4



Figure 4 The Innovative Design of Suzhou Tourism Products: The Production Process of the 'Flower Series'
Source: Illustrated by the Author (15 June 2025)

Figure 5



Figure 5 The production process of the innovative design of Suzhou tourism products, the 'Bird Series'

Source: Illustrated by the author (15 June 2025)

Figure 6



Figure 6 The Innovative Design of Suzhou Tourism Products: The Production Process of the 'Fish Series'

Source: Illustrated By the Author (15 June 2025)

6. DISCUSSIONS

Firstly, market research should be deepened to accurately identify the target consumer group and design Suzhou embroidery products that align with public aesthetic preferences and practical needs, such as home goods and fashion accessories that incorporate modern lifestyles, for example, canvas bags, to expand the market audience. Second, efforts should be made to strengthen the inheritance and innovation of Suzhou embroidery techniques. This can be achieved by establishing studios and offering video tutorials to cultivate a new generation of inheritors. Additionally, designers should be encouraged to collaborate with embroiderers to blend traditional craftsmanship with modern design concepts, thereby developing more innovative products. Furthermore, the cultural essence of Wu culture should be deeply explored, with elements such as water town ecology and folk customs incorporated into the design of Suzhou embroidery

tourist souvenirs to enhance the cultural value of the products. Additionally, emphasise the practicality and cost-effectiveness of products, such as designing canvas bags featuring Suzhou embroidery, allowing tourists to experience the charm of Suzhou embroidery in their daily lives. Finally, strengthen cultural inheritance and promotion, utilise online media channels to enhance the visibility and influence of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs, and drive their expansion into broader markets.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote the living inheritance and innovative development of 'Wu Culture,' it is necessary to establish a multi-dimensional practical system: First, deeply integrate the design of Suzhou embroidery tourism souvenirs with the essence of Wu Culture. By extracting cultural symbols such as Jiangnan gardens and water town ecology, and combining Chinese painting composition with hand-pushed embroidery and traditional hand-embroidery techniques, create cultural and creative products such as fabric bags and calendars that blend practicality with artistic value, meeting modern aesthetic demands; Second, establish a digital platform for intangible cultural heritage protection, integrating Wu culture databases, Suzhou embroidery technique demonstrations, and online interactive functions. Utilise virtual reality technology to bring historical scenes to life and enhance public engagement; Finally, with cultural heritage preservation as the core, integrate tourism resources through a website to provide customised tourism services and e-commerce channels for Suzhou embroidery products, forming a virtuous cycle of 'cultural experience consumption conversion economic feedback,' achieving a win-win situation for intangible cultural heritage protection, cultural dissemination, and tourism economic development.

8. NEW KNOWLEDGE AND THE EFFECTS ON SOCIETY AND COMMUNITIES

On the cultural front, Suzhou embroidery has moved from museum display cases into the daily creative work of young people. Through initiatives such as 'Garden Embroidery Classes' and 'Ancient Patterns, Modern Interpretations' workshops, traditional techniques have become 'tangible and accessible,' sparking young people's identification with Wu culture and fostering innovative transformations. For example, the integration of the Taiping Bird pattern with street graffiti has transformed intangible cultural heritage into a medium for youthful expression. Economically, cultural and creative products like functional canvas bags and embroidered watches leverage museum gift shops and intangible cultural heritage markets to form an industrial chain, driving dual improvements in tourism economy and craftsmanship value, and transforming 'finger-tip craftsmanship' into 'finger-tip economy.' At the community level, the 'craftsman-youth dialogue' mechanism between resident designers and embroiderers, combined with the 'apprenticeship points system' incentive framework, has reconfigured the intergenerational inheritance network. Landmarks such as the Dongshan Town Plant Dyeing Workshop and Taihu Lake Sketching Base have become cultural landmarks, driving the coordinated development of surrounding industries. At the technological level, motion capture databases and the development of natural mordant enzymes have addressed challenges related to process standardisation and environmental sustainability, providing a model for the modernisation of traditional industries. This model not only safeguards Suzhou embroidery techniques but also ensures the continued growth of this millennia-old intangible cultural heritage within contemporary societal systems through educational restructuring, economic empowerment, and community participation

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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