

# The Comparative Analysis of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese Embroidery Patterns in Late 19th-Early 20th Century

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**Abstract:** *The Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns and Han Chinese embroidery patterns both carry with integral parts of the arts in Southeast Asia and China. They have evolved gradually throughout social and historical transformations, representing distinct ethnic embroidery crafts rooted in cultural origins, exchanges, and aesthetic preferences. Employing comparative analysis, this study reveals that there were similarities and differences between the two ethnic embroidery patterns in late 19th-early 20th century. By comparing the themes, composition, color combinations and embroidery techniques of both ethnic embroidery patterns during this period, it is found that there were similarities between the two ethnic groups because of their common cultural origins, traditional techniques and formal aesthetics of the patterns, as well as the influence and integration of cultural exchanges. There were differences between them due to various factors such as culture, region, usage and aesthetic preference. Comparing and analyzing the both embroidery patterns can help to understand how embroidery art in different cultural contexts influences and integrates with each other. The study sheds light on the relationship between Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns and Han Chinese traditional embroidery, presenting solid theoretical and historical research value, while also fostering international cultural exchange and fostering friendly relations .*

**Keywords:** Baba Nyonya, Han Chinese, embroidery patterns, heritage

## 1. Introduction

Baba Nyonya refers to a group with mixed Chinese and Malay cultural heritage in Malaysia and Singapore (Suryadinata, 1997). The origin of Baba Nyonya culture can be traced back to the 15th and 16th centuries when Chinese merchants began to frequently trade in Southeast Asia, particularly in Melaka, an important trading center (Kuo, 2018). During this process, some Chinese immigrants chose to settle in the region and formed families with Malay women. The descendants formed a unique mixed-race group known as Peranakan or Straits Chinese (Lee, 2007).

The origin of Han ethnicity in China can be traced back to the ancient Chinese civilization of Huaxia. According to legend, the Yellow Emperor is considered the ancestor of the Huaxia ethnic group and one of the founders of Chinese civilization. During the Yellow Emperor time, tribes from various regions of China began to merge, forming the initial stages of a unified culture. Throughout history, China has experienced multiple waves of ethnic migration and integration. The establishment and unification of dynasties such as the Shang, Zhou, Qin, and Han accelerated the integration of various ethnic groups across the country. Particularly, the

unification during the Qin and Han dynasties had a profound impact on the formation of the Han ethnicity. The Han ethnicity gradually formed and was established between Qin and Han dynasties. After the unification of China under the Qin Dynasty, large-scale cultural unification and standardization of language and writing were carried out, which laid the foundation for the formation of the Han ethnicity (Wang, 2015). The formation of the Han nationality was further strengthened and it became one of the major ethnic groups in China during the Han Dynasty.

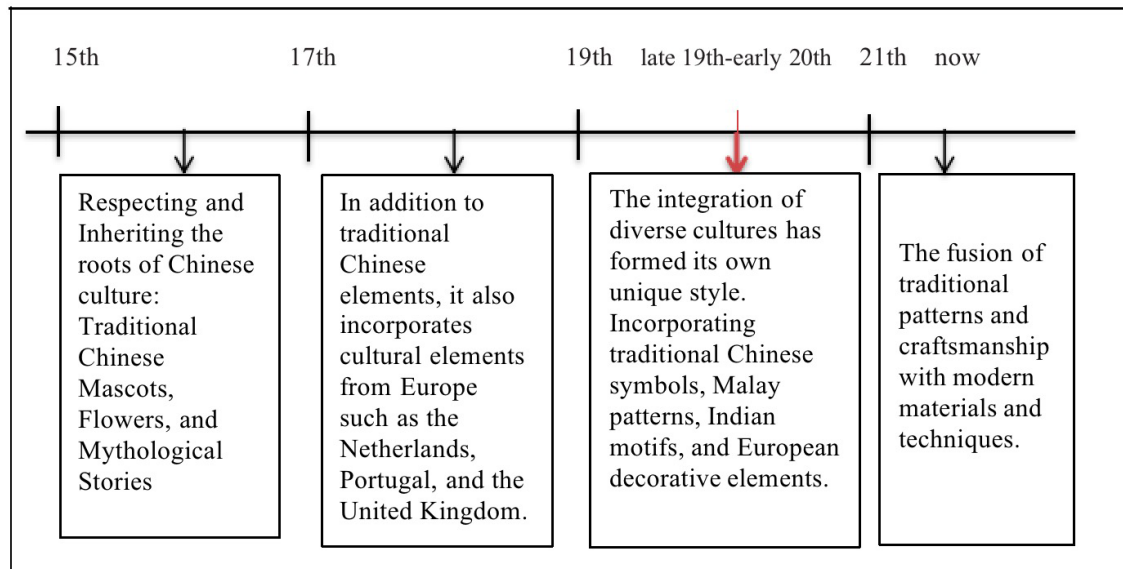
In late 19th-early 20th century, Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese patterns were each a treasure of traditional embroidery culture of two countries, and they both displayed colorful artistic styles and cultural connotations. The community created Baba Nyonya embroidery, and the embroidery patterns were known for their unique ethnic flavor and exquisite embroidery skills (Wong, 2019). Han Chinese embroidery patterns are an important part of traditional Chinese handicrafts, which carry a long historical tradition and deep cultural heritage (Zhang, 2018). In late 19th-early 20th century, there were some similarities and differences between the two embroidery patterns in terms of cultural background, artistic style and embroidery techniques and both of them had important artistic value and historical significance, so they are worth further in-depth discussion and comparison.

Although Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns were both unique cultural heritages in late 19th-early 20th century, researchers have rarely compared the similarities and differences between them. Current researches focused on the historical development, artistic characteristics and embroidery techniques of each (Ahmad et al., 2019; Kim, 2008; Teoh, 2016; Shen, 2022; Lan, 2005), with relatively little in-depth exploration of the similarities and differences between the two as well as their mutual influences. In the context of modern globalization, Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns are facing new challenges and opportunities in terms of cultural inheritance, artistic innovation and market development, so a comparative study of them is of great theoretical and practical significance. Therefore, this article aimed to compare Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns in late 19th-early 20th century, to explore the similarities and differences between them in terms of their themes, composition, color combinations and embroidery techniques, and to analyze the reasons of similarities and differences between the two embroidery patterns.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Baba Nyonya embroidery pattern**

The development of Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns reflected a complex process of cultural integration, artistic innovation, and social change (Tan, 2020). Baba Nyonya culture originating from the 15th to 17th centuries, emerged as Chinese merchants migrated to Southeast Asia and intermarried with local ethnic groups such as the Malay women. The descendants formed a unique mixed-race community known as the Straits Chinese, Peranakan or Baba Nyonya (Lee, 2007). This cultural group integrated elements from Chinese, Malay and European cultures during the colonial period, forming a distinctive lifestyle and artistic expression, including Baba Nyonya embroidery. Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns exemplified the history of Baba Nyonya culture, characterized by diverse integration and continuous innovation. Starting from the early Chinese traditional pattern, then integrating Malay and European elements and finally evolving into modern design innovations, the evolution of Baba Nyonya embroidery pattern reflected their exploration and expression of Baba Nyonya cultural identity. These patterns not only showcased the unique charm of Baba Nyonya culture but also served as a testament to the rich and diverse cultural exchanges and integrations in the Southeast Asian region, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: The development history of Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns**

From the 15th to the 17th century, Southeast Asia experienced a period of historical significance, marked by the influence of various cultures and ethnicities (Choo & Lee, 2018). The region surrounding the Straits, particularly present-day Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and others, emerged as a melting pot of diverse cultures. This area attracted immigrants from China, India, Arabia and other regions, forming multicultural communities (Khoo, 2004). The Peranakan, or Baba Nyonya, is a subgroup within the Straits Chinese community, descended from local women and Chinese immigrants, with man referred to as Baba and woman as Nonya. This community gradually formed between the 15th and 17th centuries, blending elements of Malay, Indonesian and Chinese cultures. The Peranakan community possessed unique cultural traditions, including clothing, cuisine, music and embroidery. Initially, Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns were heavily influenced by Chinese traditional art, particularly in pattern design and color application. These early patterns often featured Chinese traditional mascots, flowers and mythological stories, reflecting the Straits Chinese people's respect for and inheritance of their Chinese cultural roots (Tan, 2016).

The 17th to the 19th centuries were the colonial period in Southeast Asia, marked by the colonial rule of European powers. The development of Baba Nyonya embroidery was closely related to the colonial history of Southeast Asia, especially with the colonial relations with the Dutch and Portuguese (Lim & Singam, 1993). During this period, countries like the Netherlands, Portugal and Britain established colonies in the region surrounding the Straits, profoundly influencing the local culture and society. Although members of the Baba Nyonya community were still descendants of Chinese immigrants, their cultural interactions with colonial rulers and local residents increased, leading to cultural integration and change, which also affected the development of Baba Nyonya embroidery (Tan, 1999). Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns underwent significant development and changed during the colonial period, a period when the development of embroidery patterns was influenced by colonial rule and the changing social environment. During this period, Nyonyas began to express their unique cultural identity through crafts such as embroidery, incorporating traditional cultural and religious elements into their embroidery patterns, which became more diverse in style (Tan, 2004). In addition to traditional Chinese elements such as phoenixes, dragons, and flowers, there were also Dutch-style floral patterns such as roses, tulips, and daisies, Portuguese elements such as blue-flower porcelain motifs, and European motifs such as crowns, crosses,

and family coats of arms (Lee, 2003). This diversity of embroidery patterns reflected the influence of different cultures and the strong ability of Baba Nyonya embroidery to blend in. The wider variety of fabrics and brighter colors of Baba Nyonya embroidery were related to the exchange of fabrics and pigments from Europe, which made Baba Nyonya embroidery more colorful.

In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the Baba Nyonya community continued to maintain ties with the local Malay culture, Indian culture and traditional Chinese culture, as well as absorbing and integrating elements of European culture brought in the colonial period, and this multicultural background contributed to the cultural fusion of Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns (Kwok, 2018). During this period, Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns entered into a stage of development of a distinctive style, incorporating Malay motifs, Indian floral patterns, traditional Chinese symbols and European decorative elements in the embroidery motifs (Tan, 2003). Baba Nyonya embroidery was also known for its rich colors and delicate details. Embroidery works were usually done in a variety of bright colors to enhance the visual effect. In addition, details and layering were also emphasized to make the embroidery patterns more vivid. Baba Nyonya embroideries continued to hold an important place in banquets and social occasions, and they were used to decorate family members' clothing and housewares such as altar tablecloths, bed curtains, pillowcases, embroidered paintings, and more (Lee, 2016). Embroidery work often reflected the wealth and social status of the Baba Nyonya family.

Since the mid-20th century, Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns have undergone a new round of innovation and development under the influence of globalization and modernization. Modern Baba Nyonya craftsmen tried to combine traditional embroidery techniques with modern design concepts to create more contemporary and fashionable embroidery patterns (Ee, 2008). These patterns not only preserved the traditional characteristics of Baba Nyonya culture, but also reflected the aesthetic trends and cultural diversity of contemporary society. Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns sought to strike a balance between tradition and modernity and pursue creativity. Its embroidery patterns retained traditional techniques and pattern elements, and incorporated modern materials, modern technology and techniques, such as modern embroidery threads, embroidery cloths and tools provide more choices, and modern technology computer-aided design (CAD) and digital embroidery machines have changed the production process (Tan, 2018). Modern market demand may influence the design of patterns in Baba Nyonya embroidery, which has been gradually commercialized in order to meet consumer demand.

From the history development above, Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns were the most distinctive in late 19th-early 20th century. Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns from the late 19th and early 20th centuries not only showed the refinement of techniques and innovation of materials, but also reflected the uniqueness of cultural fusion, retaining traditional Chinese and Malay elements and incorporating European artistic styles, reflecting the social changes and cultural development of Baba Nyonya culture during this period of history.

## **2.2 Han Chinese embroidery pattern**

Han Chinese embroidery is an integral part of traditional Chinese handicrafts, boasting a long and rich history that spans thousands of years. Renowned for its unique craftsmanship and intricate designs, it embodies profound cultural connotations and aesthetic characteristics in its patterns (Shang, 2014). The development history of Han Chinese embroidery patterns is diverse and colorful, tracing back to ancient times and evolving over millennia. It reflected the

inheritance and innovation of Han culture while also being influenced by historical, social, and cultural backgrounds, as shown in table 1.

**Table 1: The development history of Han Chinese embroidery patterns**

Historical stages	Time	cultural elements	embroidery pattern themes
Pre-Qin period	21st century BCE- 221 BCE	The embryonic period of Han embroidery art	Mainly using geometric shapes and symbolic patterns.
Han Dynasty period	202 BCE- 220 CE	During the prosperous period of the Silk Road, cultural exchanges with the Western Regions and Central Asia deepened the diversity of embroidery techniques.	In addition to traditional geometric and symbolic patterns, embroidery designs featuring natural landscapes such as mountains and rivers, figures, flowers, and birds have been added, along with symbolic patterns like dragons and phoenixes.
Tang and Song Dynasties period	618 CE -1279 CE	With the flourishing development of Buddhism and Taoism in China, embroidery patterns carried symbolic meanings related to imperial authority and religion.	In addition to patterns featuring dragons, phoenixes, flowers and mythological stories, religious embroidery has become an important form of expression. Embroidery patterns are often used to decorate Buddhist statues, murals, and prayer flags inside temples and palaces.
Ming and Qing Dynasties period	1368CE- 1912CE	Often used to express cultural and religious beliefs, Han embroidery patterns and decorative styles have been influenced by Western and Indian cultural elements.	The design elements are rich and diverse, including dragons, phoenixes, flowers, mythological stories, etc. Some literati and scholars also engage in embroidery, integrating literature, poetry, and painting into their embroidery works.
Late Qing Dynasty and Republic of China	late 19th-early 20th century	Society underwent profound changes, reflecting local characteristics and social culture.	Modern elements such as cars, electrical wires, and light bulbs are incorporated into embroidery works, reflecting the changes of the times.
Since the founding of the People's Republic of China	Since the mid-20th century	Stepping onto the international stage, spreading Chinese embroidery culture to various parts of the world.	There is a trend towards incorporating modern elements to adapt to contemporary life and aesthetic demands. While traditional design elements still exist, they are often combined with new creative ideas.

The Pre-Qin period marked the inception of Han Chinese embroidery art, possibly in its primitive and rudimentary form. Although literature and archaeological materials from this period were relatively limited, some ancient artifacts and archaeological discoveries provided clues about the development of Han Chinese embroidery patterns. Fragments of embroidery and fabrics unearthed from ancient tombs displayed the design elements and embroidery techniques of that time. By the Shang and Zhou dynasties, embroidery techniques became more mature, giving rise to more intricate patterns, primarily consisting of geometric shapes and symbolic motifs (Zhao, 2004). The earliest embroidery might have been used to decorate clothing and household items. During the Pre-Qin period, embroidery may have been



associated with court and aristocratic culture. Royal workshops likely produced exquisite embroidery pieces for court attire and gifts. Some traditional Han embroidery motifs, such as dragons, phoenixes and cloud patterns, may have existed since the Pre-Qin period. These elements carried cultural and symbolic significance, reflecting ancient Chinese religious, mythological and historical themes. The rise of the Silk Road facilitated exchange between China and other cultures, leading to the diversification of embroidery techniques and design elements. Cultural elements from the Western Regions and Central Asia may have also influenced Han Chinese embroidery (Watt, 1997).

The Han Dynasty marked a pinnacle in the development of ancient Chinese embroidery, with significant advancements in embroidery techniques and a richer variety of design content. In addition to traditional geometric and symbolic patterns, embroidery designs incorporated natural landscapes, figures, flowers and birds, with symbolic motifs such as dragons and phoenixes (Kuhn, 2012). Dragons symbolized imperial authority and power, while phoenixes represented auspiciousness and happiness. Symbolic patterns were widely used in court attire and ceremonial occasions, reflecting the aesthetic preferences and cultural characteristics of the time. During the Han Dynasty, embroidery techniques were inherited and developed in China. Embroidery had become an important handicraft skill used to adorn court attire, household items and gifts. Specialized embroidery workshops were established in the Han court to produce royal garments and gifts (Wu, 2010). The Han Dynasty coincided with the prosperity of the Silk Road, deepening cultural exchanges between China, the Western Regions and Central Asia, which contributed to the diversity of embroidery techniques. Influences from external cultures likely led to the diversification of embroidery patterns.

The Tang and Song Dynasties were crucial periods in the development of Chinese embroidery patterns, marking a new stage in the art of embroidery. During this time, embroidery designs became more intricate, diverse in subject matter, and particularly in the Song Dynasty, realism was elevated to new height (Kuhn, 2012). Embroidery patterns depicting flowers, birds, figures, landscapes and other subjects were vividly realistic and exquisitely crafted. The flourishing of imperial embroidery workshops during this period saw the production of royal garments and palace furnishings. Imperial embroidery works typically utilized silk, gold threads, silver threads, gemstones and pearls, showcasing high levels of craftsmanship and artistic value (Vollmer, 2004). They often featured motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, flowers and mythological stories. Buddhism and Taoism flourished in China during this period, so the religious embroidery became an important expression (Leidy, 2010). Embroidered patterns adorned Buddha statues, murals, and prayer flags in temples and palaces, often carrying religious symbolism. In addition to court and religious embroidery, embroidery among the Han ethnic group during the Tang and Song Dynasties also flourished among the common people. Folk embroidery was commonly used to decorate clothing, household items and wedding gifts, with a greater diversity of design elements reflecting the characteristics of different regions and social classes.

The Ming and Qing dynasties were a critical period in the development of Han Chinese embroidery patterns, and the art of embroidery reached an unprecedented height, with not only a wide variety of patterns, but also more specialized and detailed techniques (Kuhn, 2012). The embroidery works of this period had great innovations in techniques, such as the addition of gold and silver strokes, which made the embroidery works more gorgeous and sparkling. Embroidery patterns were often used to express cultural and religious beliefs. They were used in temples, monasteries and courts to decorate idols, scripture streamers and ceremonial objects. Palace embroidery workshops continued to flourish during this period, becoming

centers for the production of noble clothing and court furnishings (Hartman, 2008). These works were typically crafted using luxurious materials such as silk, gold threads, silver threads, pearls and gemstones, featuring a rich variety of motifs including dragons, phoenixes, flowers and mythological stories (Jackson & Hugus, 2004). Additionally, Han Chinese embroidery continued to be widely practiced and developed among the common people. During this period, cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries increased, influencing embroidery patterns.

During the late Qing Dynasty and the Republican era, China underwent significant social transformations, including the 1911 Revolution and other major events in modern Chinese history. These societal changes also influenced the development of embroidery, giving it a more contemporary character (Lee, 2007). With the decline of the Qing Dynasty, the imperial embroidery workshops gradually waned, leading to a decrease in court embroidery. However, during the Republican era, some embroidery artisans still preserved traditional craftsmanship, and Han Chinese embroidery received broader inheritance and development among the common people. The styles and motifs of embroidery diversified across different regions, reflecting local characteristics and social culture. Han Chinese embroidery patterns also began to incorporate modern elements, with some embroidered works featuring elements such as automobiles, electric wires and light bulbs, reflecting the changes of the times. During the Republican era, embroidery was also used for political propaganda and experienced commercialization. Some embroidered works may have showcased national flags, portraits of political leaders and political slogans to express political support and patriotic sentiments (Finnane, 2008). Additionally, the embroidery became commercialized as a commodity. Embroidered products were made into clothing, home goods, and gifts, sold in markets and shops.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the development of Han Chinese embroidery patterns has experienced various stages, influenced by political, social and cultural factors. During the Cultural Revolution, Chinese culture and traditional arts suffered severe destruction. The embroidery craftsmanship was questioned and suppressed, leading many traditional artisans to face serious difficulties. The implementation of the reform and opening-up policy provided an opportunity for the revival of Han Chinese embroidery patterns. Traditional embroidery techniques began to receive attention and protection, but some artisans and artists revitalized this craft. Han Chinese embroidery patterns were widely applied in folk and commercial fields during this period. Embroidered products such as clothing, home goods and gifts became hot-selling commodities in the market. Han Chinese embroidery patterns began to integrate modern elements to adapt to contemporary life and aesthetic demands. While traditional patterns still existed, they were often combined with new creativity. Han Chinese embroidery patterns from China also gained more attention and recognition on the international stage (Kwan, 2013). Some embroidery artists and craftsmen participated in international embroidery exhibitions, spreading Chinese embroidery culture worldwide. To preserve the tradition of craftsmanship, some families and workshops actively passed down the embroidery skills to ensure they were not lost.

### **3. Methodology**

This study employs the qualitative method, specifically comparative analysis, to carefully comparative analyse and interpret Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns. A comparative analysis is a side-by-side comparison that systematically compares two or more things to pinpoint their similarities and differences (Gleicher, 2017). It allows one to consider

phenomena that vary both qualitatively and quantitatively (Rihoux, 2006). Ragin uses the term 'qualitative' to indicate that qualitative comparative analysis enables the researcher to analyse phenomena that vary in nature, that are present or absent, and not only in degree (Ragin, 2002), that each case is considered as a complex and specific combination of features (Ragin et al., 1996), and that qualitative comparative analysis allows examination of constellations, configurations and conjunctures (Ragin, 1987).

This study was conducted in Malaysia, Singapore and China. The research collected primary sources from fieldwork, including objects, documents and photographs. Collecting as much relevant information as possible from field studies, Baba Nyonya fieldwork sites were the Straits Settlements that are Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum in Malacca, Pinang Peranakan Mansion in Penang, Peranakan Museum in Singapore. Han Chinese fieldwork sites are Jiangnan University Folk Costume Museum, Chinese Silk Museum and Fujian Provincial Museum in China. Through field investigation at Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum and Han Chinese Museum, this study focused on the objects, documents and photographs of embroidery patterns in the museums from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Comparative analysis is used as an approach in the analysis and interpretation of embroidery patterns of two ethnic groups after the data collection. The analysis involves two levels. The first level of analysis focused on the similarities and differences between two embroidery patterns in late 19th-early 20th century. At this level, comparative analysis is used to carefully compare the two ethnic embroidery patterns in terms of their themes, composition, color combinations and embroidery techniques. According to Pickvance (2001), two conditions should be met in comparative analysis. Data must be gathered on two or more cases. The cases may be countries, cities, firms or families-the nature of the unit is irrelevant. b. There must be an attempt to explain rather than only to describe. So, the second level of analysis focused on explaining the reasons for similarities and differences between the two embroidery patterns.

## **4. Analysis and Discussion**

### **4.1 Similarities and Differences in Embroidery Pattern Themes**

#### **a) Similarities**

Both Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese tended to use traditional cultural themes, such as dragons, phoenixes, lotus flowers, longevity peaches, auspicious beasts and other classic Han pattern elements. These themes had cultural and symbolic meanings that reflected the cultural traditions of the two ethnic groups. Some religious and mythological patterns can also be found in both embroideries of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese, such as religious symbols from Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, or characters and scenes from mythological stories. These pattern elements reflected the importance of religious beliefs and myths in the cultures of both ethnic groups. They both had incorporated natural elements, such as flowers, birds, and animals, into their embroidery patterns to show their love and respect for nature. In Han Chinese embroidery, flowers such as plum blossoms, orchids, and chrysanthemums were often used to convey auspiciousness and purity. They also featured embroidery motifs with family and life themes, including motifs for family scenes, household items and celebrations, reflecting the importance of daily life and family in both ethnic cultures.

#### **b) Differences**

Baba Nyonya embroidery was culturally influenced by the Southeast Asian region, and therefore may incorporate local folklore, mythology, and Malay and Indonesian cultural elements such as traditional Malay floral patterns, legendary creatures, and ornaments. This



made Baba Nyonya embroidery more diversified in terms of subject matter and inclusive of a variety of regional cultures, which made Baba Nyonya embroidery different from Han Chinese embroidery. In addition, Baba Nyonya embroidery may include ornaments such as metallic threads, precious stones and jewels, making the work more ornate. On the other hand, Han Chinese embroidery was relatively conservative in its colors and accessories. Baba Nyonya embroidery was often used to decorate traditional Nyonya clothing and houseware, so the subject matter may be more varied to suit different decorative needs. In contrast, Han Chinese embroidery may have a wider range of applications, which can cover everything from clothing to home furnishings and artwork.

## **4.2 Similarities and Differences in Embroidery Pattern Composition**

In late 19th-early 20th century, the compositions of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns were similar in some ways, with an emphasis on symmetry, layering and central focus, but were also influenced by their respective cultures, geographies and uses, and thus had some differences that gave them their own distinctive compositions.

### **a) Similarities**

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were some similarities in the composition of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns, such as both having symmetrical surnames and balances, both having a central focal point or main element, and both focusing on layering. Figure 2 showed a Han Chinese opera character embroidered waistband. The embroidery pattern was symmetrical along the central axis, and the figures and flowers on the left and right sides were basically the same in shape, color, and arrangement. This symmetrical layout gave a balanced and harmonious visual effect. The opera characters in the middle were the focal point and central scene of the whole embroidery pattern, and the details of their costumes and movements attracted attention. The background used interlaced geometric and botanical patterns, which enrich the overall visual effect without stealing the elegance of the main elements. Although the embroidery was flat, the use of different embroidery stitches and color combinations, along with the contrast between the characters and the background, created a sense of depth and hierarchy visually. Overall, this embroidery achieved a harmonious and layered composition through its symmetrical and balanced arrangement, and the prominence of the central character pattern.

As shown in Figure 3, it was a Peranakan embroidered mirror cover. The composition of Baba Nyonya embroidery pattern displayed rich symmetry, balance, central focus, and layering. The embroidery pattern was centered on a central oval framed motif, and the surrounding decoration exhibited mirror-image symmetry. Both the motifs within the oval frame and the floral and animal motifs on the periphery corresponded precisely on either side of the center axis, creating a balanced visual effect. The central focal point of the pattern was a brightly colored oval frame with a deep red interior background embroidered with animal prints and floral motifs. The contrasting colors of this central focal point made it the most striking part of the entire embroidery. The beautifully designed border around the pattern was embroidered with a variety of floral and bird motifs on a dark background, forming a strong foil to the central motif. The embroidery created a rich sense of layering through different stitches and color combinations, and the color contrast between the background and the motifs, as well as the changes in the thickness of the embroidery threads, all add to the visual depth. By analyzing the embroidery patterns of two ethnic groups, it can be seen that the symmetry of the composition, the central focus and sense of hierarchy and the careful arrangement of the embroidery details, together created a visual feast that was both traditional and modern aesthetic.



**Figure 2: Han Chinese embroidered waistband, late 19th century, China National Silk Museum.**



**Figure 3: Peranakan embroidered mirror cover, late 19th century, Peranakan Museum.**

## b) Differences

There were also some obvious differences in the styling and decorative details of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns. The styling of traditional Chinese cultural themes in Baba Nyonya embroidery differed greatly from that of Han Chinese, with the styling of such themes being more abstract and minimalist in Baba Nyonya embroidery and more realistic and vivid in Han Chinese embroidery. Taking dragons and phoenixes as an example, in Baba Nyonya embroidery, dragons were usually more abstract and usually took on a more simplified form with a curved body, claws and a dragon's head. Baba Nyonya may emphasize the elegance and mystery of the dragon, but with relatively little emphasis on the details. Dragons in Han Chinese embroidery usually had more detail and complexity. Han Chinese dragon images may emphasize detailed parts of the dragon such as scales, eyes, and mane. The dragon's form may be more realistic and vivid, reflecting the reverence and mystery of dragons in Chinese culture. The phoenix in Baba Nyonya embroidery was usually a beautiful phoenix bird, often with bright feathers and ornate tail feathers. The phoenix was styled with attention to detail and richness of color to enhance the visual appeal of the phoenix. The phoenix in Han Chinese embroidery usually presented an ornate image, but its styling may be more traditional and classic. The feathers of the phoenix were usually red and gold in color and its long tail feathers were often emphasized. The image of the Han Chinese phoenix emphasized its mystical and auspicious meaning. Baba Nyonya embroidery often used metallic threads, gemstones, and jewelry to add a sense of grandeur to the work. These ornaments were often embedded in the embroidery, enhancing the texture and luster of the work. Han Chinese embroidery, while it may also use gold threads, usually focused more on the drawing of lines and details and placed less emphasis on ornaments.

## 4.3 Similarities and Differences in Color Combinations of Embroidery Patterns

### a) Similarities

In the late 19th-early 20th century, the color combinations of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns were similar in some ways, with bright colors and traditional symbols dominating. Bright, vibrant colors were usually used in Baba Nyonya embroidery and Han

Chinese embroidery. These colors included red, gold, emerald green, purple and others, which were considered auspicious and lucky in both cultures of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese. For instance, Figure 4 shows Nyonya wedding attire, while Figure 5 depicts Chinese Han wedding attire, both adorned in red and gold. Red symbolizes good fortune and happiness, while gold signifies wealth and honor, bestowing blessings upon the bride for a lifetime of happiness and prosperity. Both traditions also tended to utilize a variety of colors to create a rainbow-like effect. By skillfully combining threads of different colors, embroidered pieces can achieve breathtaking color gradients.



**Figure 4: Baba Nyonya bridal attire, early 20th century, Pinang Peranakan Mansion**



**Figure 5: Han Chinese bridal attire, early 20th century, Jiangnan University Folk Costume Museum**

## **b) Differences**

However, they were influenced by their respective cultures, regions and uses, making them distinctive in their color schemes. Unlike Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns, which may have a more colorful and diverse color palette reflecting the vibrant color traditions of the Southeast Asian region, the color combination of Han Chinese embroidery may be more influenced by traditional culture and symbolism. The embroidery patterns of Baba Nyonya may feature a more diverse and colorful color palette because they incorporated locally specific color elements, such as the Malay traditional color jade green or the Indonesian traditional color purple, to reflect regional and multicultural influences. Emerald green color symbolizes life and nature in Malay culture. This color may be used in Baba Nyonya embroidery to depict plants and natural elements. Purple color is associated with royalty and nobility in Indonesian tradition. In Baba Nyonya embroidery, purple may be used to highlight ornate elements. In contrast, the color palette of Han Chinese embroidery may be more influenced by traditional culture and symbolism. Baba Nyonya embroidery was often used to decorate traditional Nyonya clothing and household items, so the color combination may be more colorful, while Han Chinese embroidery was more versatile and may have different color palettes depending on the use and material. Gold color was often used for embellishment and decoration in Han Chinese embroidery. Gold threads or filigree were often used to outline details and added a sense of grandeur and opulence. Gold also symbolized wealth and prosperity.

## **4.4 Similarities and Differences Embroidery Techniques**

### **a) Similarities**

In late 19th-early 20th century, the embroidery techniques of Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns were similar in some ways, involving a high degree of manual skill and finesse. Both Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery were based on the traditional craft of hand embroidery, which relied on the skill and patience of the artisan. Both embroideries required the embroiderer to master various embroidery stitches and techniques. Both embroideries used embroidery techniques such as flat embroidery, needlepoint and stitching to create designs. These techniques involved the use of different types of needles, threads and embroidery cloths to achieve the desired effect. Additionally, both emphasized the intricacy of



lines and the precision of embroidery. Whether embroidering flowers, animals, or decorative patterns, high levels of skill were needed to depict the details accurately.

### **b) Differences**

They were also influenced by their respective cultures, geographic regions and uses, and thus there were some differences that give them their own uniqueness in terms of embroidery techniques. Beadwork was often incorporated in Baba Nyonya embroidery, which involved hand-sewing small beads onto fabric. These beads can be glass, gemstones or other materials. They were meticulously stitched onto the fabric to form intricate patterns. Baba Nyonya beadwork emphasized the precision and detail of embroidery, typically featuring elaborate floral, animal, botanical and decorative motifs. It was commonly used in the creation of accessories such as clothing, shoes, jewelry, bags, etc. Figure 6 shows a Baba beadwork belt, while Figure 7 depicts Nyonya beadwork shoes. These beadwork accessories were all exceptionally ornate and grand, showcasing wealth and status. In contrast, Han Chinese embroidery techniques during the late 19th and early 20th centuries typically did not extensively use beadwork. The primary techniques of Han Chinese embroidery include flat stitching, backstitching, seed stitching and so on, using materials such as silk threads and other fabrics. Han Chinese embroidery focused more on the expressive use of lines and colors, as well as the reproduction of paintings and patterns. Therefore, there were notable differences in techniques and materials between Han Chinese embroidery and Peranakan beadwork.



**Figure 6: Baba beadwork belt, late 19th century, Peranakan Museum (Singapore).**



**Figure 7: Nyonya beadwork shoes, early 20th century, Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum.**

## **5. The reasons of Similarities and Differences Between both Embroidery Patterns**

The similarity between Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns in late 19th-early 20th century partly stems from cultural origins, cultural exchange and integration, embroidery techniques shared, as well as aesthetics of pattern form. Despite being geographically distant, these factors contributed to certain commonalities in pattern designs, reflecting embroidery as an art form with universal and cross-cultural value.

Peranakan culture emerged from Chinese communities in the Straits Settlements region, which historically maintained close cultural ties with China. Despite the geographical distance between Peranakan communities and China, their cultural roots remained connected, allowing certain traditional Chinese cultural elements and patterns to be preserved and integrated into Peranakan embroidery designs. The Straits Settlements region had long been a center of cultural exchange, where merchants and artisans from different cultures and ethnicities likely exchanged techniques and pattern designs, facilitating the spread of embroidery craftsmanship. Peranakan culture itself was a product of cultural fusion, blending elements of Malay, Indonesian and Chinese cultures. Therefore, Peranakan embroidery may have been influenced by Han Chinese embroidery.

Certain pattern elements possessed universality and cross-cultural nature, such as flowers, fauna, geometric patterns, etc. These elements may appear in embroidery across different cultures and were shared between Peranakan and Han Chinese embroidery. Embroidery is an ancient craft, and many embroidery techniques have similarities across different cultures. Basic embroidery techniques like flat stitching, needle stitching and seam stitching may have appeared in embroidery traditions in different regions, potentially leading to similarities between Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns. In the same way, certain fashion trends and aesthetic preferences may have been popular across different cultures. Different cultures may tend to create patterns with balance, symmetry and beauty. This aesthetic form appeared in embroidery designs across different regions, hence contributing to similarities in form.

In late 19th-early 20th century, the differences in embroidery patterns between Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery mainly stemmed from a variety of factors such as different culture, geographical differences, aesthetic preferences and different uses. These differences reflected their respective cultural traditions and historical backgrounds, which gave their embroidery patterns their distinctive artistic styles.

The Baba Nyonya of the late 19th-early 20th century lived mainly in the Straits region of Malacca, Penang and Singapore, where they were the offspring of marriages between Chinese and local Malays. Their cultural background was influenced by the local Malay culture, and they also retained some of the traditional Chinese culture. In contrast, Han Chinese embroidery was the part of traditional Chinese culture and its embroidery patterns were influenced by various aspects of Chinese history, philosophy and religion. Therefore, the difference in cultural background led to the differences in embroidery patterns between the two ethnic groups.

Baba Nyonya lived in Southeast Asia and was influenced by the tropical climate and rich natural resources. Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns usually incorporated elements of regional characteristics of Southeast Asia, such as Malay patterns, Indonesian flowers, local flora and fauna, etc. These elements reflect the local environment and culture. In contrast, Han Chinese embroidery emphasized more on the symbols and elements of traditional Chinese culture, such as dragons, phoenixes, lotus flowers and longevity peaches.

There were differences in aesthetic interests and formal aesthetics across cultures and regions, which also influence the design and composition of embroidery patterns. The color palette of Baba Nyonya embroidery was often more colorful and diverse, reflecting the vibrant color traditions of Southeast Asia. The color palette of Han Chinese embroidery may be more influenced by traditional culture and symbolism, often including meaningful colors such as red



and gold. In addition, fashion trends and business connections may influence the design of embroidery patterns. These factors contributed to the differentiated embroidery styles and element choices of the two ethnic groups.

Baba Nyonya embroidery motifs were often used to decorate weddings and banquets, and were an important part of the traditional Nyonya dowry. As such, Baba Nyonya embroidery was more ornate and opulent, including beadwork and decorative items. Han Chinese embroidery patterns were often used for different traditional purposes, such as ceremonial clothing, home furnishings and religious ceremonies. Therefore, Han Chinese embroidery was more focused on the complexity of the patterns and the smoothness of the lines.

## 6. Conclusion

Baba Nyonya embroidery originated from immigrant influences and later integrated with local culture to innovate, eventually forming a distinctive embroidery style, becoming an important symbol of cultural exchange in the Straits. Han Chinese embroidery patterns have a long history, evolving through the inheritance and development across multiple dynasties, and have become an important part of Han culture. In late 19th-early 20th century, Baba Nyonya embroidery patterns fused Chinese and Western cultural elements, presenting a unique cross-cultural style; Han Chinese embroidery patterns also presented some unique characteristics during this period, and the art of embroidery inherited the traditions, but also incorporated new elements and characteristics. Baba Nyonya and Han Chinese embroidery patterns both showed unique artistic styles due to social changes in late 19th-early 20th century.

By comparing the themes, composition, color combinations and embroidery techniques of the two embroidery patterns in late 19th-early 20th century, it is found that there were similarities between the two ethnic groups because of their common cultural origins, traditional techniques and formal aesthetics of the patterns, as well as the influence and integration of cultural exchanges. There were differences between them due to various factors such as culture, region, usage and aesthetic preference. Comparing and analyzing the both embroidery patterns can help to understand how embroidery art in different cultural contexts influences and integrates with each other. It provided a model for the study of cultural exchange and integration and facilitates in-depth research into fusion phenomena in other cultural fields. Furthermore, it can promote cultural exchange and cooperation among different countries and ethnic groups, strengthening international cultural exchange and friendly relations. Peranakan embroidery and Han Chinese embroidery patterns are both valuable cultural heritage, reflecting the history, values and creativity of their respective communities. In modern times, they should both be protected and inherited, encouraging innovation and integration, combining modern aesthetics and market demands, and promoting the innovative development of traditional embroidery art to integrate it with contemporary life, ensuring that future generations can continue to appreciate and understand these exquisite artistic traditions.

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