

Translating Traditional Chinese Fish Motifs into Contemporary Womenswear: A Practice-Based Design Study

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Abstract

Traditional Chinese motifs are frequently incorporated into contemporary fashion through direct reproduction or surface decoration, which can obscure the cultural meanings and formal principles embedded within their historical sources. This study investigates how traditional Chinese fish motifs, primarily derived from ceramic decoration, can be systematically transformed into contemporary high-end womenswear while maintaining a traceable connection to their cultural and visual heritage. A practice-based design methodology was employed, integrating historical and visual analysis of a 42-example ceramic fish-motif corpus, comparative analysis of five fashion cases, field observation, motif abstraction and recomposing, material and hand-painting experiments, and iterative garment development. The analysis identified recurring design characteristics, including curved body axes, directional movement, fin and tail projections, internal textures, compositional rhythms, and culturally associated meanings of abundance, prosperity, harmony, and auspiciousness. These characteristics were subsequently abstracted, recomposed, and translated from two-dimensional decorative imagery into garment structures, cut lines, panels, sleeves, ruffles, and hand-painted surfaces. The resulting four-look womenswear collection demonstrates that fish motifs can function not only as surface imagery but also as a generative design language for three-dimensional garment construction. The study proposes a traceable heritage-to-fashion translation framework in which cultural research informs visual analysis, motif transformation, material experimentation, structural adaptation, and final design realization. This approach contributes to practice-based heritage-fashion research by demonstrating how traditional motifs can be transformed rather than literally replicated, while retaining identifiable cultural and formal relationships with their historical sources. The study does not claim environmental or technical performance; rather, it establishes a methodological and design foundation for future research incorporating textile testing, cultural-expert evaluation, and wearer or consumer assessment.

Keywords: Chinese fish motifs; heritage-informed fashion design; practice-based research

Introduction

Fashion is both material practice, cultural communication, and a system in which identities and historical references are constantly being remade (Barnard, 2002; Entwistle, 2000; Kawamura, 2005). Heritage is thus no longer a collection of visual quotations in a global design context. It can serve as a living source of cultural knowledge, whose meanings are activated, negotiated and changed in contemporary practice (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Smith, 2006; UNESCO, 2003). This distinction is especially significant in the context of Chinese visual culture, where decorative forms often blend aesthetic organization with linguistic, symbolic, social, and historical connotations. When these forms become part of fashion, the problem isn't just how to make a historic style look

modern, but how to modernize it without breaking the bond between visual style and cultural significance. Chinese dress and decorative culture has never been completely static. The history of Chinese dress shows how court usage, urban modernity, national identity, production, and transnationalism are all interconnected (Finnane, 2008; Steele and Major, 1999). Similarly, Chinese ceramics underwent long series of technological, aesthetic and regional evolution from Neolithic pottery to later stoneware and porcelain traditions (Chang, 1986; Kerr and Wood, 2004; Liu and Chen, 2012; Medley, 1976; Vainker, 1991). Such histories are useful in challenging visual histories that are assumed to be static and unchanging under the guise of “tradition.” In design research, tradition is more like historically layered material culture that can be used to support new interpretations if its source logic is examined and not just sampled. Fish imagery is particularly fruitful in traditional Chinese decorative forms, as it is rich in symbolic connotations and has a rich formal vocabulary. Fish are depicted in early painted pottery and throughout later ceramic traditions, both singly and in pairs or groups, and in association with aquatic plants, waves, lotus and other decorative structures. The fish is also a lucky symbol, because yu (fish) is homophonic with yu (surplus), and specific stories, like the carp and the Dragon Gate, link fish imagery with perseverance and transformation (Bartholomew, 2006; Eberhard, 1986). Fish-specific studies on Ming-period Yunnan blue-and-white porcelain further underscore the significance of fish as a decorative motif, and the aesthetic and cultural content conveyed by the compositional treatment of the motif (Xie et al., 2026). Chinese visual culture has been used as a source of inspiration for contemporary fashion many times. The exhibition and catalogue *China: Through the Looking Glass* highlighted the wide-spread dissemination of Chinese porcelain, costume, decorative arts and film imagery in international fashion, and that design translation is not necessarily a process of reproduction but one of transformation (Bolton et al., 2015). Similar processes are found in the design of qipao, Ming-Qing dress references, court-dress motifs, paper-cutting, auspicious patterns, embroidery, and more recently, three-dimensional printing using textiles (Ding and Kolosnichenko, 2024; Gao and Yezhova, 2023; Li et al., 2022; Li and Kim, 2021; Liu and Jiang, 2025; Ma and Choi, 2020; Ryu et al., 2011; Zhu and Ha, 2015). In this literature, the processes of simplification, enlargement, stylization, recombination, colour modification and structural adaptation are repeated strategies that enable the heritage to be legible in contemporary fashion. A certain gap still exists, however, between the research on Chinese fish imagery as historical decoration and the creation of a generative system for the design of contemporary garments. Historical studies on fish are usually fish-centred, dealing with origin, symbolism, iconography, chronology or ceramic composition, while fashion studies are more likely to discuss general categories of Chinese motifs. Fashion can also be used to keep things at the level of recognisable surface imagery: a fish is enlarged, printed, embroidered or otherwise applied to a garment. While these applications are valid, there is another design issue that has not been fully explored: the internal formal logic of the fish motif, its curvature, directionality, fin and tail forms, scale rhythms, spatial relationships, and compositional flow can be extracted and left to inform the structure and surface treatment of the garment. The present study aims to answer that question by an applied, practice-based investigation. It poses the question: How can traditional Chinese fish motifs, which were mainly used in the decoration of ceramics, be abstracted, recomposed, constructed into garments and hand-painted onto surfaces in a way that is culturally informed and is translated into contemporary high-end womenswear? The inquiry is guided by three subsidiary questions: (1) what are the symbolic and formal qualities of the fish motif that are most important during translation; (2) how can these qualities be transferred from two-dimensional decoration to three-dimensional structure of the garment; and (3) what does hand painting add to the material expression of the transformed motif? The study has three contributions. Firstly, it focuses the heritage-fashion research on a relatively under-examined motif while maintaining its historical and symbolic context. Second, it suggests a translative process from the source research to the visual analysis, motif abstraction, structural adaptation, material experimentation, and realization of the garment. Third, it shows the route of a four-look womenswear collection where fish-inspired shapes impact cut lines and silhouettes and hand painted surfaces. The goal is not to propose universal rules for Chinese-inspired fashion, but to make one designer-researcher's transformation process explicit, inspectable, and reusable as a methodological precedent for other heritage-informed design projects.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Heritage as a dynamic design resource

Heritage research is a helpful starting point to differentiate preservation from design translation. The UNESCO 2003 Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, knowledge, skills and associated cultural spaces that are identified by communities as part of their cultural heritage, and that are transmitted and recreated, rather than being immobile (UNESCO, 2003). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) also considers heritage as a metacultural production, that is, heritage is made visible through processes of selection, framing, performance and circulation of cultural forms. Smith (2006) also questions the object-centred definitions and considers heritage as a cultural process of memory, identity, performance and value. These views support a fashion design perspective that continuity does not need to be formalized as duplication, but a historically informed motif can be modified as long as the connection to its source and meanings is critically legible. This is a process-based view that aligns with craft theory. Adamson (2007) and Sennett (2008) both emphasize making, skill, material engagement, and embodied knowledge as important ways of cultural production. In fashion, this is important because a traditional motif doesn't just enter a garment as an image. It also faces issues of fabric behaviour, cut, scale, drape, seam construction, hand skill, and the temporal process of making. The present research thus

considers hand painting and the making of garments as places where cultural translation is materially negotiated, rather than as post-design decoration.

2.2 Chinese dress, material culture and visual identity

The research on Chinese dress demonstrates that visual identity is historically determined. Finnane (2008) illustrates how fashion and sartorial change were active in late-imperial and modern China, and Steele and Major (1999) trace the relationship between Chinese dress, modernity, identity, and western influence. These accounts challenge the idea that the designer of today is faced with a choice between an unchanging tradition and an imposed modernity. Rather, there are processes of adaptation, hybridization and reinterpretation within Chinese dress history itself. The same temporal depth is found in ceramics. Archaeological syntheses place painted pottery in the context of Neolithic cultural development and give the larger picture of the contexts in which animal and geometric motifs arose (Chang 1986, Liu and Chen 2012, Underhill 2013). The histories of ceramics record the evolution of material technologies and decorative practices over successive periods, such as the introduction of glazes, the manufacture of porcelain, the use of cobalt decoration and the development of multi-colour enamel systems (Kerr and Wood, 2004; Medley, 1976; Vainker, 1991). In this study, ceramic history is not employed to build a new archaeological chronology, but rather to explain why ceramics are a suitable visual record for the formal evolution of fish imagery through time.

2.3 Fish imagery: symbolism, composition, and historical continuity

Pictorial form is often paired with wordplay, narrative, cosmology and conventional association in Chinese auspicious imagery. As described by Eberhard (1986) and Bartholomew (2006), the symbolic density of Chinese visual culture and the use of rebus, homophones, paired images, plants, animals, and objects to produce layered meanings in Chinese art are evident in the use of fish. Fish are associated with abundance and surplus and can be combined to increase auspicious meaning. The cultural significance of fish imagery is thus not just a generic appreciation of an aquatic animal, but is historically situated in a larger visual communication system. Fish imagery's formal attributes are also important for design. Curvature, tapering, axial movement, fin and tail projection, repetitive scale textures and directional relationships between multiple bodies are all natural features of the fish body. These features are accentuated by the historical ceramic compositions, which are placed in a circular manner on dishes, in continuous bands on vessels, swimming among aquatic plants, and in dynamic opposition or pairing. In a targeted analysis of fish imagery on Ming Yunnan blue-and-white porcelain, Xie et al. (2026) further emphasizes the importance of considering fish imagery both culturally and compositionally. The analytical categories employed in the present research are based on this dual perspective, semantic and formal.

2.4 Transformation of traditional Chinese motifs in contemporary fashion

The study of qipao and historic dress reference shows that recognizable Chinese forms are often modified in silhouette, detail, fabric, colour and pattern, instead of being simply copied as complete historic dress (Ryu et al., 2011; Zhu and Ha, 2015). Ma and Choi (2020) also demonstrate that the traditional court-dress motifs are simplified, exaggerated, combined, and reinterpreted in modern fashion. Li and Kim (2021) take this logic one step further, drawing on Chinese paper-cutting techniques as a generative principle for modern qipao design, rather than just a motif to be affixed to a surface. Recent studies with a design focus make the transformation process increasingly explicit. Li et al., (2022) create contemporary clothing based on Chinese auspicious patterns, and Gao and Yezhova (2023) relate traditional pattern analysis to the modern clothing design. Ding and Kolosnichenko (2024) highlight four key points for adapting auspicious patterns without losing cultural relevance: simplification, stylization, updated colour, and craft integration. Liu and Jiang (2025) integrate traditional Chinese geometric patterns with 3D printing and garment prototyping using textiles, demonstrating that traditional visual sources can also be transferred to new production technologies. Together, these studies demonstrate that effective heritage adaptation requires selection and transformation, not repetition. The present study is an extension of this literature, with two differences. It is a study of a single motif family, the Chinese fish pattern, and traces it from the historical ceramic analysis to structural and surface design. It also reveals the intermediate steps: formal cues are extracted, abstracted, distorted, tested materially and only then used in garments. This explicit chain is crucial to consider when assessing whether the current result can be traced back to its origin.

2.5 Hand painting, materiality and high end fashion

Hand painting provides a materially different alternative to the repeated industrial surface reproduction. Contemporary silk painting can be characterized as having its own unique ground, expressive effects and multiple styles, as Zhang and Li (2014) state. Naharani et al. (2018) show through experiments that the painting behaviour varies depending on the fibre and fabric properties such as absorption, surface structure and edge and gradient control. Conservation research on painted textiles also highlights the importance of considering the materials, sampling, and physical behaviour of flexible, layered textile supports, which differ from rigid or stretched painted surfaces. These studies contribute to the methodological choice of considering the interaction between fabric and paint as part of the design development process and not assuming that an image created on paper or screen will be the same when applied to fabric. Craft and slow-fashion scholarship also provides a useful, but limited, interpretive context. Slow Fashion thinking is linked to attributes like longevity, authenticity, localism, exclusivity, transparency and added value of the product by Clark (2008), Fletcher (2008) and Jung and Jin (2014, 2016). Hand-made fashion can engage in some of these logics, especially in the aspects of

uniqueness and labour visibility. This study, however, does not perform life cycle assessment, resource accounting or consumer research and therefore does not argue that the painted garments are environmentally superior to printing or other surface technologies. Conceptual craft, uniqueness and extended value here is not proof of environmental performance, but the relevance of slow-fashion literature. Udale (2008) and Hopkins (2022) also highlight the significance of material choice, surface creation, and iterative prototyping in fashion design practice.

2.6 Research gap

The literature identifies five points: Chinese heritage is not static; fish imagery is symbolically and formally rich; traditional imagery is already transformed in contemporary fashion; practice-based methods can generate design knowledge; and painted textiles require material experimentation. Less developed is a motif-specific, practice-based account that ties these bodies of knowledge together in one traceable process. The gap that is filled here is thus not a lack of scholarship on Chinese fish symbols, nor a lack of Chinese-inspired fashion. It is a lack of an explicit pathway that demonstrates how historical fish motifs can be analysed as visual-cultural structures, abstracted without losing their source legibility, transferred to the construction of garments and materialized through hand painting. The study aims to fill this gap by using the conceptual framework presented below.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The framework is a combination of three ideas. First, heritage is not a list of items to be transmitted and re-created, but a process (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Smith, 2006; UNESCO, 2003). Second, visual motifs are regarded as structured design information, composed of semantic and formal aspects. Third, design practice is considered as a legitimate mode of inquiry where knowledge can be generated through making, reflection and iterative testing (Archer, 1995; Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Cross, 2001; Frayling, 1994; Gray and Malins, 2004; Schön, 1983; Skains, 2018; Sullivan, 2010). The model that emerges is that cultural translation is a traceable sequence, not a metaphor. Historical and symbolic research is used to determine the meaning of the motif and where it is found. Visual-semantic analysis is used to determine transferable characteristics. Those characteristics are then modified by design transformation using abstraction and recombination. Material translation is a test to determine if the new forms can function in fabric, paint, cut and volume. The final garments are read as research results, as it reflects decisions made at every previous stage.

This pathway is summarized in figure 1.

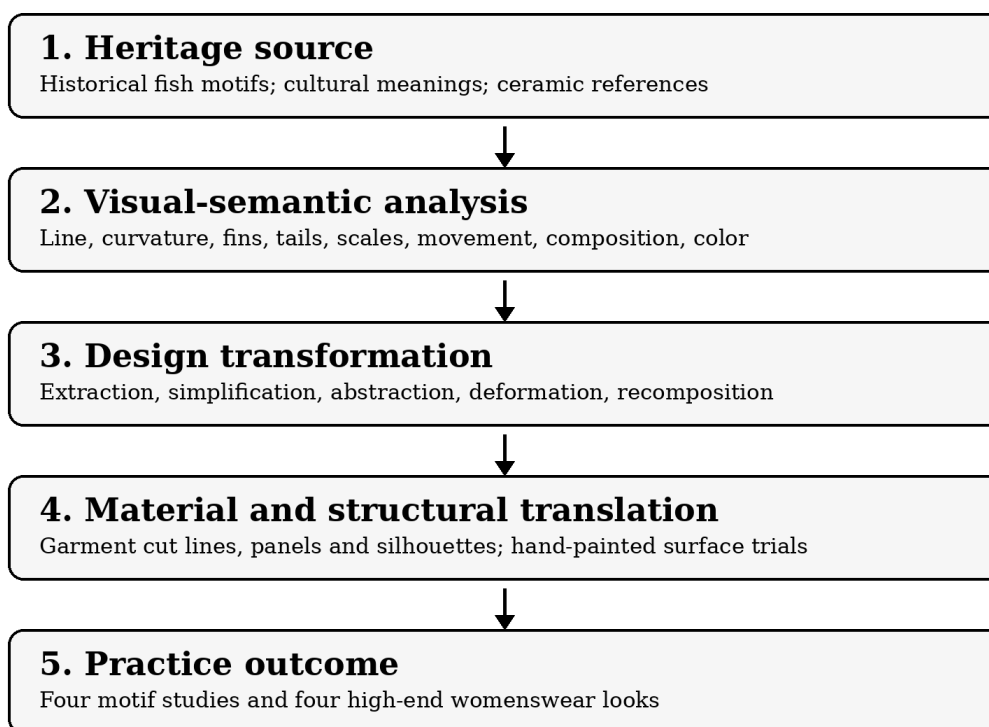


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for translating a historical cultural motif into contemporary fashion through traceable practice-based stages. Developed for this paper from the actual research process.

Table 1. Conceptual constructs and their operational meaning in the study

Construct	Meaning in this study	Observable evidence
Cultural continuity	Retention of a traceable relationship to Chinese fish-pattern history and symbolism.	Use of fish-derived forms, culturally grounded colour/reference systems, and explicit source documentation.
Formal transformation	Deliberate modification rather than literal replication.	Extraction, simplification, deformation, recomposition, scale change, overlap, and directional reorganization.
Structural translation	Migration of motif logic from surface image to three-dimensional garment construction.	Fish-derived cut lines, fins/tail-inspired panels or sleeves, silhouette and directional flow.
Material translation	Adaptation of visual ideas to the behaviour of textile and paint.	Fabric sampling, paint absorption/adhesion observations, wash and dry-brush effects, hand-painted final surfaces.
Practice-based knowledge	Knowledge generated through iterative design action and reflection.	Sketches, four motif drafts, material trials, technical drawings, and four final design outcomes.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study was applied, qualitative and practice-based design. The focus of the inquiry was not a human population, but a design problem: how a historically and culturally significant two-dimensional motif could be adapted to contemporary womenswear. The research thus involved an iterative making process and interpretive source analysis. This is in line with design-research accounts which acknowledge that knowledge is created through disciplined practice, but in which the research question, process, evidence, and reflective logic are made explicit (Archer, 1995; Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Cross, 2001; Frayling, 1994; Gray and Malins, 2004; Skains, 2018; Sullivan, 2010). No questionnaire, interview, experiment with human subjects, psychometric instrument, market survey or statistical hypothesis test was performed. Thus, population parameters, participant characteristics, response rates, measurement scales, Cronbach's alpha, inferential statistics and power analysis are not applicable. The methodology below only includes procedures documented in the underlying design study and visible in the design records.

4.2 Research setting and source corpus

The study was based on the background of fashion-design research in China, and the main visual source was the traditional Chinese fish decoration, particularly the ceramic fish decoration. The underlying design study created a historical visual corpus of 42 fish-pattern ceramics, tabulated from early painted pottery through to later dynastic ceramics. The books, articles, online and museum materials and field-research materials were used to compile the corpus. The corpus is not a statistically representative sample of all Chinese fish imagery, but rather is considered here as a purposive design-reference corpus, as the underlying design study did not record a formal probability-sampling frame, database search protocol, or complete provenance code for every image. The second comparative corpus comprised of fashion cases from the underlying design study such as Guo Pei, Angel Chen, Rodarte, Margarita Alvarez and Christian Dior/John Galliano. These cases were compared to direct representation, printing, embellishment, deformation and more general methods of fish or Chinese-inspired imagery. They were not statistically analysed and not put forward as a comprehensive overview of the fashion industry.

4.3 Data collection

Four types of evidence were gathered. The development, symbolism, composition and aesthetic characteristics of Chinese fish imagery were first explored through literature and historical materials. Second, visual material was collected from books, articles, internet and field observation for image based analysis. Third, some domestic and international fashion cases were selected and compared to gain an understanding of the current strategies for adapting fish and Chinese cultural imagery. Fourth, field research and museum observation were employed, where possible, to gain first-hand knowledge of Chinese decorative objects, clothing, and visual culture. The design study underlying the records mentions image analysis as a technique for analysing composition, colour, texture and pattern characteristics. These observations are presented in an open analytical matrix for this article: (a) outline/body shape; (b) line and curvature; (c) fin and tail geometry; (d) scale or internal texture; (e) movement/direction; (f) number and relational

arrangement of fish; (g) surrounding aquatic motifs; (h) colour system; (i) degree of geometric abstraction versus naturalism; and (j) cultural/auspicious meaning. This matrix is not a new way of coding the categories that did not exist in the underlying design study narrative.

4.4 Analytical procedure

The analysis was done in an iterative fashion. First, historical examples were read for their cultural meanings, and then visually compared for recurring and changing formal properties. The observation of the underlying design study that the fish-pattern form evolved from simpler geometric or linear forms to more detailed and naturalistic forms in later examples, but with recurring features of curvature, movement, and auspicious association, was given particular attention. The comparative fashion cases were then analyzed to determine the distinction between direct and transformative use of the motif. This difference was used as the design guideline for the next stage of practical work: the final work should be recognisable as a variation of the fish motif but not necessarily be a literal fish illustration.

4.5 Design-development procedure

Practical work started with exploratory sketches of garments and motif trials. Four drafts of the motif-development were kept in the underlying design study. They said they extracted fish forms from various ceramic examples, combined several motifs, varied symmetry, deformed and liquefied body shapes, combined direct and abstract representation, changed scale, and used blue, iron-rust/orange, yellow/gold, and white relationships. Some of the motif composition was done in Adobe Photoshop, and a research board was created in CAD, although the versions of these software were not documented during the design study. The same iterative process was used for the development of the garments. Many initial sketches were created, and then four looks were chosen to be developed. The design goal was to transfer the motif to the structure of the garment and to its surface decoration. The lower garments were shaped, panelled, ruffled, cut and painted with motifs inspired by fish tails, fins, body curvature and direction of movement. Front/back construction and silhouette were communicated with technical sketches.

4.6 Material and painting experiments

Silk paints, acrylic fabric paint, embroidery thread, brushes and a spoon were used to create small experimental samples on approximately 4 × 4 inch fabric pieces. Wash, dry-brush/stroke, chain-pull and thread-painting approaches are documented in the underlying design study. In the trials reported, silk paint was more likely to penetrate the fabric, while acrylic fabric paint was more likely to be visible on the surface and to become stiff, crackled, or scratchy after drying if applied in heavy amounts. The designer thus tried pre-washing fabric, wetting it to facilitate blending, drying for about 24 hours, and heat-setting at medium heat for 4–7 minutes. These are practice observations and not standardized textile-performance tests; no instrumental colorfastness, abrasion, wash-fastness, tensile or toxicity testing was done. In the collection, simulation silk fabric was chosen because the designer felt that the softness and drape of the fabric were suitable for the desired silhouettes and painting technique. The underlying design study did not record the exact type of fibre used, nor commercial specification of the fabric, so the term ‘simulation silk’ is retained as the author's description of the material rather than being changed to a more specific fibre claim.

4.7 Rigor, validity, and reflexivity

Rigor was sought by means of triangulation of historical literature, visual evidence, comparative fashion cases, field observation, and practical experimentation. Visual findings were not accepted as design rules until they were tested through drawing, recomposition and garment development. Iteration was a method of practice-based validation, whereby design decisions that were not convincingly convertible into fabric or garment structure were modified or abandoned. This is not an external validation, but rather an explicit representation of the internal logic of the design process. The study is still interpretive and designer-led, with the researcher's aesthetic judgment being an integral part of the method, not an eliminated source of subjectivity (Schön, 1983; Sullivan, 2010). An interrater reliability was not performed as the design study did not involve multiple coders. There are thus no statistical reliability or construct-validity coefficients. The primary credibility strategy is evidentiary traceability, which means that the reader can follow from the historical/formal observations to the motif drafts, material tests, technical drawings, and final collection outcomes.

4.8 Ethics and image rights

No human subjects, interviews, personal data, clinical procedures or identifiable private information were involved in the study. Thus, human-subjects ethics approval was not required for the research reported. Cultural ethics were dealt with by means of source-based interpretation and by placing the fish motif in the context of Chinese visual heritage instead of being a culturally neutral ornament. This paper only reproduces the images of the design process and garment illustrations from the underlying design study by the designer-researcher for journal publication. Photographs of museum objects and images from runways that were used as references in the underlying design study are not reproduced here as their publication permissions would have to be checked separately.

Table 2. Methodological evidence chain

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Stage	Actual evidence used	Output
Historical/cultural review	Books, articles, museum/online visual material, field observation.	Historical and symbolic understanding of the fish motif.
Visual analysis	42 ceramic fish-pattern examples tabulated in the thesis.	Recurring formal attributes: line, shape, curvature, movement, fins/tails, scales, composition, colour.
Comparative fashion analysis	Five named designer/brand cases discussed in the thesis.	Distinction between direct representation and more transformative applications.
Motif development	Four retained abstraction/recomposition drafts; Photoshop-assisted composition.	New fish-derived surface compositions.
Material experimentation	Approx. 4×4-inch trials; silk and acrylic fabric paints; wash/dry-brush/other techniques.	Qualitative observations of paint behaviour and expressive effects.
Garment development	Exploratory sketches, four selected looks, technical drawings.	Fish-derived silhouettes, cut lines, sleeves/panels, placement strategies.
Final practice outcome	Four-look high-end womenswear collection.	Material demonstration of the proposed cultural-translation pathway.

5. Results

5.1 Historical and formal synthesis of the fish-motif corpus

Three interrelated findings were supported by the 42-example ceramic corpus. First, there was significant formal variation in the fish images in the historical examples. Previous instances in the design study mentioned above featured simplified, elongated, geometric or highly stylized fish, and later examples often featured more pronounced fins, scales, eyes, body volume, and aquatic environments. The corpus thus did not confirm the notion of a single ‘Chinese fish pattern’ but rather a family of related visual strategies that varied in their degree of abstraction, naturalism, composition and technique over time. Second, there were several formal properties that were productive throughout that variation: curved body axes, tapering and bifurcated tail forms, fin-like projections, repetitive internal marks, opposing or circulating direction, and interaction with water plants or wave-like forms. These properties were more applicable to the fashion design than any single historical fish image, as they could be separated from the actual fish and recombined into new forms. Third, the visual analysis was connected to cultural meaning. Even though the final pattern was extremely abstract, the association of fish with abundance, prosperity, harmony and auspiciousness was a conceptual anchor that was maintained throughout the design process. The result was not a ‘marine’ collection, as such, per se. It was explicitly derived from traditional Chinese fish imagery, blue-and-white ceramic references, selected wucan-related orange/red and yellow/gold accents, and the continued presence of fish-derived structural movement.

Table 3. Synthesis of historical/formal observations used for design translation

Analytical dimension	Observed tendency in thesis corpus	Design implication
Shape	Range from geometric/stylized bodies to more naturalistic fish.	Permit abstraction without requiring photographic realism.
Line and movement	Curving, circulating, opposing, and swimming directionalities.	Use line as seam/cut-line logic and to guide painted flow.

Analytical dimension	Observed tendency in thesis corpus	Design implication
Fins and tails	Distinct projecting or fan-like forms; tails often visually emphatic.	Generate sleeve, panel, ruffle, and lower-garment forms.
Internal texture	Scales, hatching, outlines, and differentiated body surfaces.	Provide rhythm and local texture for painted/stitched surface treatment.
Composition	Single, paired, grouped, circular, and plant-associated arrangements.	Support repetition, overlap, asymmetric placement, and recomposition.
Color	Blue/white ceramic traditions plus multicolor red/orange/yellow accents in later wares.	Establish a restrained blue-white base with selected warm accents.
Meaning	Auspicious associations with abundance, prosperity, harmony, and achievement.	Maintain a culturally specific narrative beyond generic fish imagery.

5.2 Material experiments

The material trials demonstrated that surface technique materially altered the appearance of the motif. Direct, thicker application produced a more tactile and opaque painted surface; wash techniques produced diffusion and softer tonal transition; dry-brush/stroke application emphasized gesture and irregular edge quality. The thesis also explored chain-pull and thread-painting as methods for producing movement or dimensionality. Figure 2 documents representative process evidence.

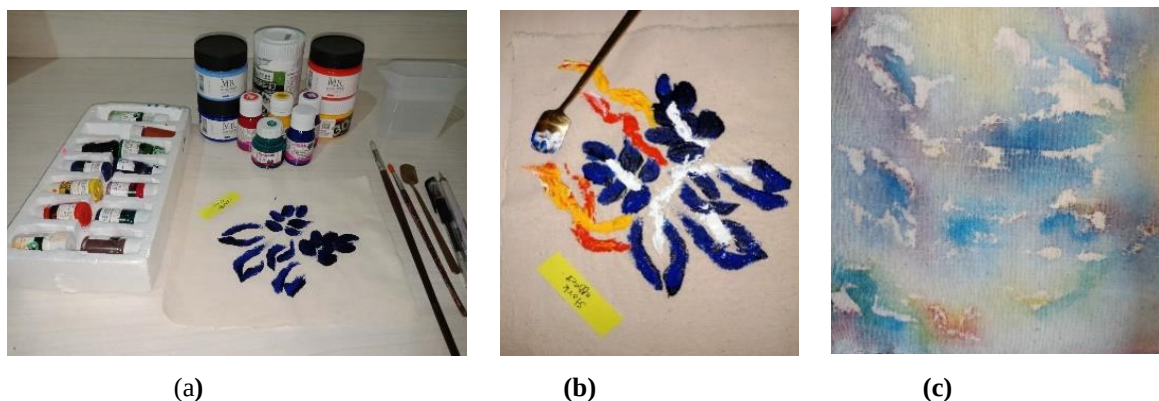


Figure 2. Representative material and hand-painting experiments from the underlying design study: (a) paints/tools and direct trial, (b) dry-brush stroke treatment, and (c) wash/watercolor-like treatment. Images are author-generated research evidence.

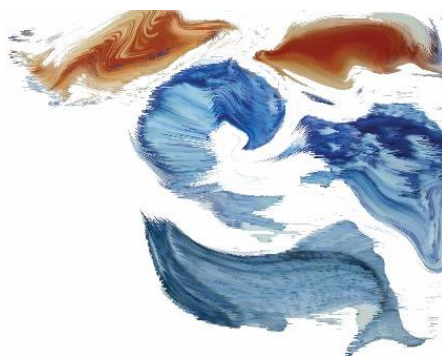
Table 4. Painting experiments and qualitative observations

Technique/material	Procedure recorded in thesis	Observed/anticipated effect	Evidence limit
Silk paint / wash	Wet fabric surface; apply diluted or fluid colour; allow diffusion.	Soft transition, transparent tint, movement and depth.	No instrumental colorfastness or wash-fastness testing.
Acrylic fabric paint	More direct/opaque application, including dry-brush-like use.	Strong surface mark and texture; heavy applications could become stiff or crackled.	Observation was qualitative, not mechanical testing.
Dry brush / stroke	Relatively dry brush or tool moved across fabric.	Scratchy, painterly, broken edge; emphasizes gesture.	No standardized repeatability assessment.

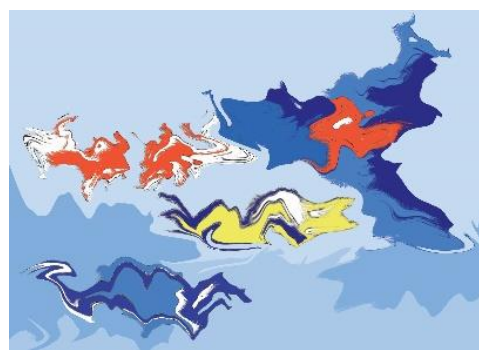
Technique/material	Procedure recorded in thesis	Observed/anticipated effect	Evidence limit
Chain pull	Painted chain/yarn moved to generate abstract traces.	Irregular flowing forms suited to fish-like movement.	Exploratory method; not quantified.
Thread painting	Free-motion stitching layered with painted surface.	Adds line, fullness, and dimensional surface information.	Used as design exploration rather than controlled textile test.

5.3 Motif abstraction and recomposition

Four motif studies have been retained, indicating that the translation process oscillated between direct reference and deformation, instead of settling on one level of abstraction. In one study, blue and warm colored forms, derived from fish, were melted down into a continuous painterly flow. Another employed more pointed, graphic silhouettes and wave-like bands. A third kept more familiar fish shapes and rearranged scale and symmetry. A fourth diffused multiple becomes a general painterly area. Throughout the set, identifiable fish features are juxtaposed with distorted shapes, reflecting the design study's stated approach of direct application and design application with deformation.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 3. Four retained motif-transformation studies from the underlying design study showing different balances of direct reference, abstraction, deformation, overlap, and recomposition. Images are author-generated design outputs.

5.4 From motif to garment structure

The garment sketches moved the study from surface design to structural translation. Instead of picking silhouettes first and adding a motif later, the designer found inspiration in fish to create variations in skirts, ruffles, panels, sleeves and cut lines. Exploratory sketches that were used to select the final four looks are shown in figure 4.

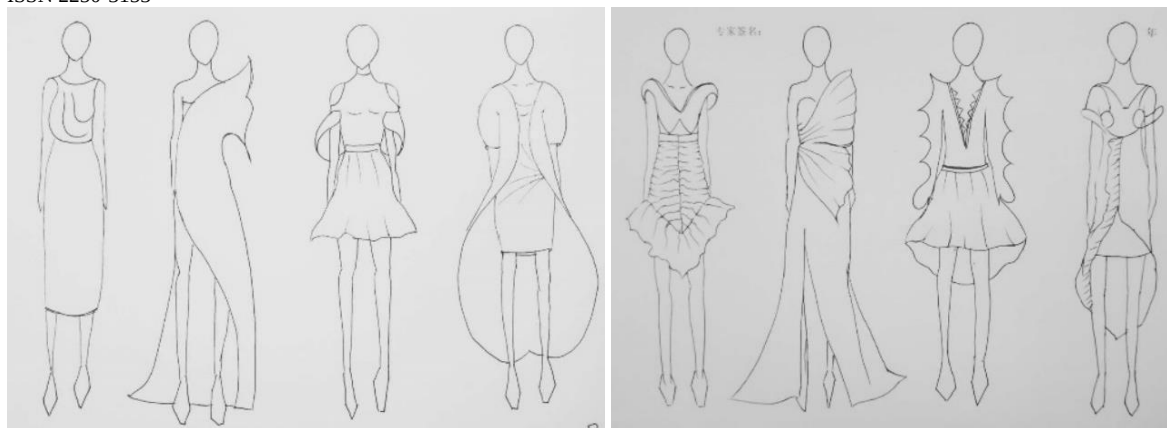


Figure 4. Exploratory womenswear sketches developed from fish derived movement, fins, tails, and painted surface placement. Author-generated design development from the underlying design study.

5.5 Final four-look collection

The final collection consolidated the research into four womenswear looks using a predominantly white ground with blue and warm accents. The collection did not repeat one motif identically across all garments. Instead, coherence was produced through shared directional movement, fin/tail-derived forms, related painting language, and a consistent colour family. Figure 5 presents the final illustrated collection, and Figures 6–9 document each look through technical and illustrative views.



Figure 5. Final four-look high-end womenswear collection. The collection integrates fish derived structural cues with manually painted surface compositions. Author-generated illustration from the underlying design study.

Table 5. Design outcomes in the four final looks

Look	Silhouette / structure	Fish-derived translation	Surface treatment
1	X silhouette; sleeveless one-piece dress; gathered centre front; ruffled lower section; centre-back zipper.	Lower-garment/tail reference and fish-derived cut-line logic.	Composed fish-derived painting on bodice; wash effect along centre-front stitched line.
2	A-line cocktail dress; asymmetrical front/back length; arm-level fabric straps; diminishing ruffle.	Overall shape derived from exaggerated/deformed fish form.	Painting concentrated at neckline and back.
3	X silhouette; knee-length dress; pleated waist; exaggerated sleeves.	Sleeves function as fin-like structural elements.	Painting emphasized on sleeves and upper visual field.
4	A-line evening gown with detachable/attachable front panel.	Panel and upper form reference fins and tail; directional blue shapes extend movement.	Blue wash on fin-like shape; composed fish-derived painting at back and panel edges.

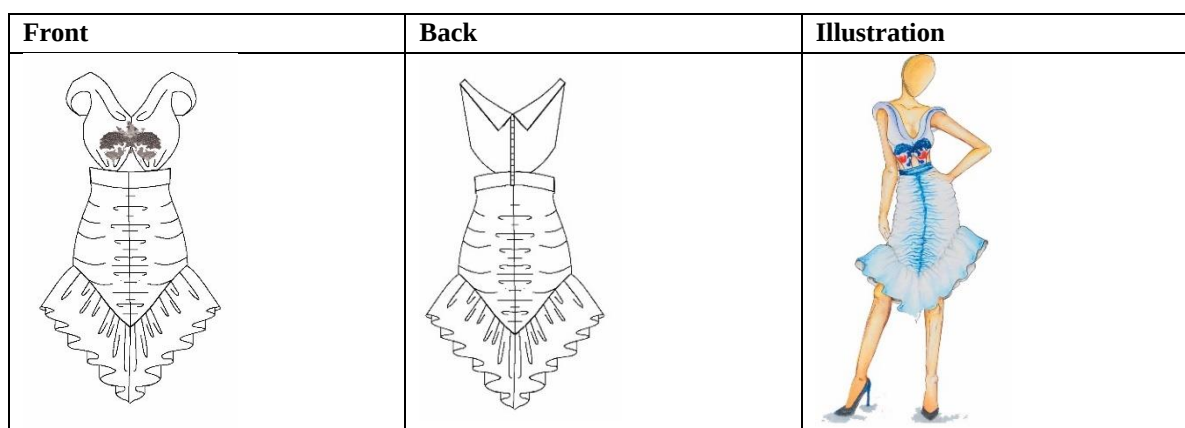


Figure 6. Look 1: fish tail derived lower structure and fish pattern surface placement. Panels show technical/flat information and fashion illustration from the underlying design study; author generated.

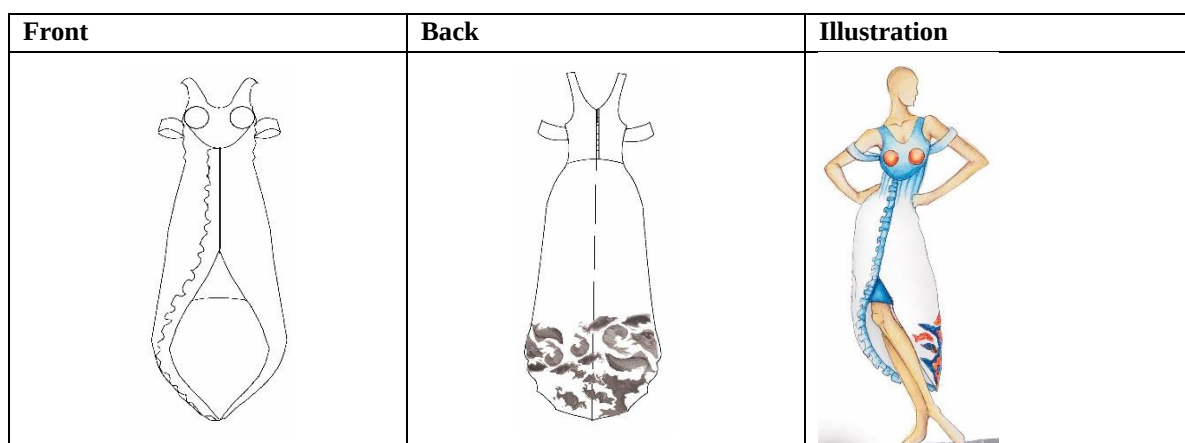


Figure 7. Look 2: A-line cocktail dress developed from exaggerated fish-form deformation. Panels show technical/flat information and fashion illustration from the underlying design study; author-generated.

Front	Back	Illustration
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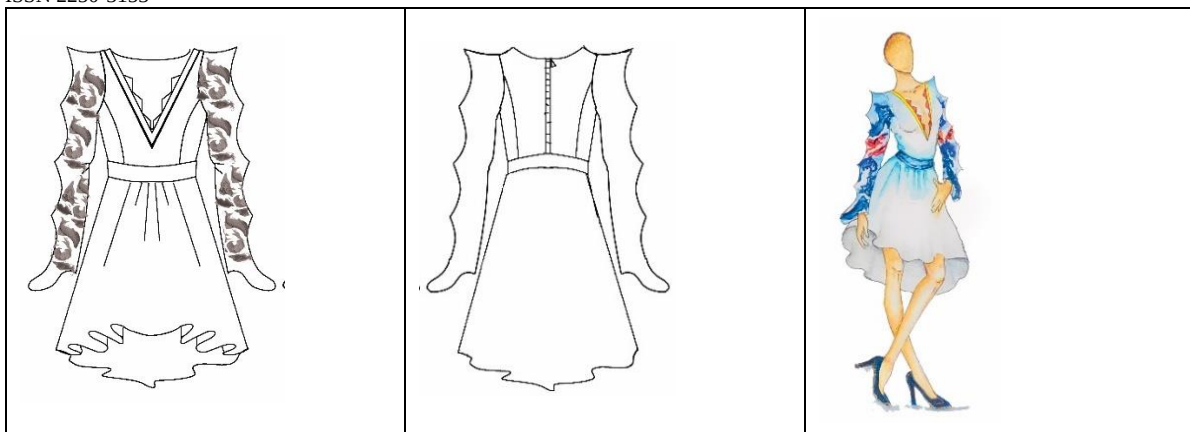


Figure 8. Look 3: X silhouette with fin-like sleeves as the principal structural translation. Panels show technical/flat information and fashion illustration from the underlying design study; author-generated.

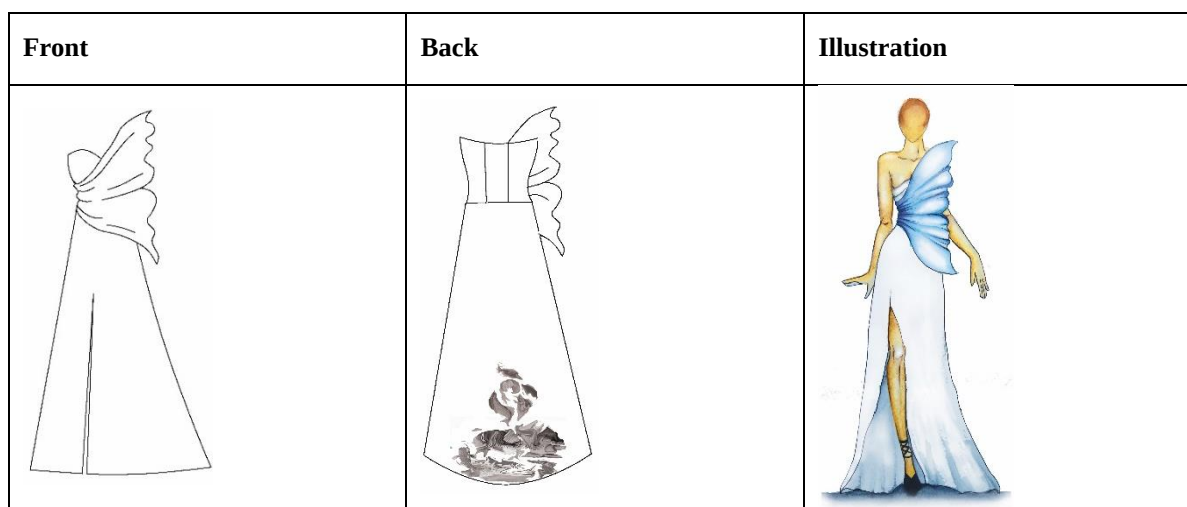


Figure 9. Look 4: A-line evening gown with fin/tail-derived front panel and painted directional treatment. Panels show technical/flat information and fashion illustration from the underlying design study; author-generated.

6. Discussion

6.1 Cultural continuity through transformation not replication

The main conclusion is that cultural continuity does not require the reproduction of a historic fish picture as such. The final collection retains source identity through a network of relationships: the cultural framing of fish as an auspicious Chinese motif; formal cues extracted from historical ceramics; a blue-and-white base with selected warm references; and the continued use of fish-derived movement in both structure and surface. This is in line with heritage theories which focus on transmission and re-creation, as opposed to static preservation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Smith, 2006; UNESCO, 2003). It also corresponds to the current fashion research that simplifies, combines, exaggerates, and materially reconstructs traditional Chinese forms (Ding and Kolosnichenko, 2024; Gao and Yezhova, 2023; Li et al., 2022; Li and Kim, 2021; Ma and Choi, 2020; Ryu et al., 2011; Zhu and Ha, 2015). The study contributes to that literature by providing details of the intermediate operations. The heritage source was not considered to be a closed image library. It was broken down into transferable properties, and those properties were used to create new relationships. This is especially evident in the transition from fish tail to lower-garment volume, fin to sleeve/panel and swimming curvature to seam/ruffle direction. The motif is not a logo, but rather a design grammar.

6.2 Surface and structure as complementary channels of translation

The second is the simultaneous structural and surface translation. Much of the motif-based clothing design is still surface-driven; many very sophisticated print or embroidery designs are not conceptually related to the garment. In this instance, the most convincing looks are a mix of painted and structural movement. Look 3, for instance, renders the fin reference legible by means of sleeve volume prior to the viewer's interpretation of the painted surface. Look 4 also adds fish-inspired motion via a detachable front panel and painted direction indicators. This structural integration helps to avoid the sense that a cultural image has been pasted on an unrelated garment. This finding is consistent with recent research on the adaptation of traditional Chinese patterns to new textile or garment technologies (Liu and Jiang, 2025), and research that has modified the traditional patterns in the form of auspicious

motifs, paper cutting, and court and qipao (Li and Kim, 2021; Ma and Choi, 2020). Future heritage-fashion research is suggested to report not only which motif was used but also where the logic of the motif was applied in the design system, such as silhouette, pattern cutting, seam lines, surface, material, construction or a combination of these.

6.3 Hand painting – material interpretation

The material trials demonstrate the need to think of hand painting as a design feature, rather than just an optional decorative feature. The properties of paint can change with the substrate, moisture, viscosity and method of application. The qualitative difference between more penetrating silk paints and more surface-sitting acrylic paint that was found in the underlying design study is consistent with other evidence that the type and surface structure of textiles affect absorption, edges, gradients and painterly control (Naharani et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2017). Likewise, Zhang and Li (2014) point out the expressiveness of silk painting. This kind of variability was exploited in the current body of work to enrich the theme of wearable art, in which the movement, diffusion and irregularity of the brush itself became an element of the visual identity of the garment. In the meantime, the study does not ensure technical durability. The heat-setting and drying were pragmatic studio processes and were not evaluated by standardized laundering, rubbing, flexing or colour fastness procedures. A journal reader should therefore interpret the results of the material as exploratory design evidence. It would be useful in the future to combine practice-based development with textile laboratory testing to determine the most effective paint/fabric combinations that would provide drape and surface integrity and colour retention with repeated use.

6.4 Craft, uniqueness and limits of sustainability claims

Hand-painted clothing is consistent with many values that have been identified in craft and slow-fashion literature: visible skill, individual variation, time-intensive production, perceived uniqueness, and attachment to making (Adamson, 2007; Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2008; Jung and Jin, 2014, 2016; Sennett, 2008). These are the qualities that can be used in high end design positioning. However, no comparison was made with digital printing, embroidery or other options regarding water, energy, chemical load, production waste or product life. The collection would therefore not be methodologically correct to describe as proven environmentally sustainable. A more defensible argument is that hand painting is a craft based way of differentiating and adding narrative value, and environmental performance is an empirical question that can be addressed in future research.

6.5 Contribution and transferability based on practice

The research also shows the importance of practice-based methodology for fashion. Design knowledge was gained not only through historical reading, but also through resistance and possibilities encountered during the making process: some forms extracted from the historical reading worked as 2D motifs but not as garment structures, some paint applications resulted in unwanted stiffness or cracking, and some sketch ideas were filtered out prior to the final four looks. These kinds of decisions in context are related to the idea of reflective practice and designerly knowing (Cross, 2001; Schön, 1983). The study documents the pathway, thereby making the tacit decisions communicable design knowledge, a key issue of practice-based research (Candy and Edmonds, 2018; Frayling, 1994; Gray and Malins, 2004; Skains, 2018; Sullivan, 2010).

6.6 Limitations A few restrictions should be stated.

First, the 42-image historical corpus was not created by a systematic archaeological review, but for design research. There are inconsistencies in the naming and dating of the source records in the original design study, and not all images had a full provenance record. For this reason, the present paper will rely on the corpus to determine design characteristics and not attempt to make quantitative statements about the frequency of motifs by dynasty. Second, the visual analysis was done by one designer-researcher only and no independent coding or interrater reliability was carried out. Third, the comparative fashion cases were not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive, but rather selective and illustrative. Fourth, the material experiments were exploratory, that is, the composition of the fabric fibres, the amount of paint added, the humidity, the number of wash cycles, the abrasion and the standardized colourfastness were not controlled or measured. Fifth, the final result is four designs and not tested with wearers, consumers, cultural experts or an external design jury. Therefore, any statements relating to comfort, commercial acceptance, cross-cultural interpretation, perceived authenticity, or consumer preference are beyond the scope of the study. These limitations are not a denial of the practice-based contribution, but they set the boundaries of it. The paper is not a theory of consumer response at the population level or a technical certification of textile performance, but a transparent design methodology and material demonstration.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the possibility of using traditional Chinese fish motifs in contemporary high-end womenswear without being literal surface reproduction of the motif, while still keeping the traditional Chinese fish motifs. The fish motif was determined to be a layered cultural and formal resource: its auspicious meanings give cultural specificity and its curvature, movement, fins, tails, scales, relational composition and colour associations give a flexible visual grammar for design. The process was practice based and involved a series of cultural research, visual-semantic analysis, motif extraction, abstraction and recompositing, material experimentation, structural garment translation, and hand-painted realization. Four motif studies and a four-look womenswear

collection demonstrated that characteristics of fish can function both as surface and structure. The contribution is thus not so much the novelty of the use of fish imagery as such, but the explicitness of the transformation pathway and the demonstration of the traceability of cultural meaning through controlled formal change. The wider implication is that heritage can be used as generative knowledge for fashion design research, and not just as a collection of images to be copied. Future research can further develop this method through the use of fully provenance-coded visual data, co-interpretation with cultural experts, standardized textile testing, wearer evaluation and comparative analysis of other traditional motifs and craft systems. These extensions would enable the cultural, material, functional and perceptual aspects of fashion informed by heritage to be assessed concurrently.

Declarations and Submission Notes

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