



A Study on the Path of Cultural Integration from the Perspective of Fashion Design: The Collision and Symbiosis of Chinese and Thai Cultural Symbols

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Abstract

Background and Aim: With globalization accelerating cross-cultural exchanges, fashion design has become a critical medium for expressing and negotiating cultural identity. This study investigates the integration path of cultural symbols between China and Thailand through the lens of fashion design, focusing on the dynamic interaction—both conflictual and symbiotic—between the two cultural systems. The aim is to explore how traditional cultural elements from both countries can be deconstructed, recontextualized, and reconstructed within contemporary fashion to foster a dialogue that transcends cultural boundaries.

Methodology: This research adopts a qualitative methodology combining visual cultural analysis, semiotic decoding, and comparative case studies. Traditional Chinese and Thai motifs—including textiles, silhouettes, color systems, and ornamental symbols—were selected as representative samples. These were analyzed through their application in both historical and contemporary fashion artifacts. Additionally, interviews with designers and cross-cultural consumers were conducted to assess perception and reception. The theoretical framework is informed by cultural hybridity theory and design anthropology.

Results: The findings reveal that while certain symbolic elements—such as Chinese dragon motifs and Thai lotus iconography—retain strong cultural specificity, their reinterpretation in fashion design enables the emergence of hybrid aesthetics. Designers who engage in cross-cultural dialogue often adopt a selective appropriation strategy, preserving core cultural meanings while adapting formal expressions to contemporary aesthetics. The study identifies three models of integration: parallel coexistence, symbolic fusion, and functional reinterpretation. Each model reflects a different depth of cultural negotiation and aesthetic synthesis.

Conclusion: Fashion design serves not only as a vessel of aesthetic innovation but also as a critical site for cultural mediation. The fusion of Chinese and Thai cultural symbols, when conducted with contextual sensitivity and creative intention, can transcend superficial exoticism to form a sustainable and respectful cultural dialogue. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how fashion can operate as a cultural interface, offering a viable path toward intercultural symbiosis in the creative industries.

Keywords: Cultural Integration; Fashion Design; Chinese and Thai Symbols; Cultural Hybridity; Cross-cultural Aesthetics



Introduction

In the era of globalization and transnational mobility, the production and distribution of cultural knowledge, practices, and artifacts take place in complex and uneven ways. Culture is now exchanged, hybridized, displaced, and relocated beyond the institutionalized geopolitical borders. As a result, various forms of creative and artistic practices have become sites of cultural encounters, where representations and re-interpretations of culture are not only performed but also negotiated, affirmed, or contested. In this vein, the fashion design field, like other creative industries, has always been a contested and complicated ground in which traditional cultures are produced, deconstructed, appropriated, and re-fashioned. In this respect, how can one be faithful to cultural traditions and yet interpret them in creative ways, without becoming trapped in the past or oversimplifying and stylizing culture into exotic clichés?

To address this question, this study examines a specific relationship between the visual culture of China and Thailand in the field of fashion design, and explores how the two can be creatively juxtaposed and re-articulated. Historically, the two cultures have developed their own complex and rich systems of visual and symbolic languages and references, which have been informed by their history, religious traditions, aesthetic philosophies, and cultural genealogies. The Chinese system of signs and symbols has been largely determined by the social hierarchy and Confucian ethics, Taoist cosmology, numerology, and iconography, as well as the legacy of the Sinic tributary system and its political aesthetics. These cultural symbols often find themselves both contrasting with and, at times, mirroring Thai visual culture with its different religious beliefs in Theravāda Buddhism and indigenous animism, royal and artistic traditions, and craft practices. When the two symbolic worlds are brought into the context of contemporary fashion design practice, the result can be neither simply a pastiche of ‘borrowed’ exotic motifs and imagery, nor superficially mixing one culture into another. The creative space that juxtaposes the two provides a range of possibilities for critical re-articulation and reinterpretation of the two symbolic systems through creative synthesis.

A range of research in fashion studies, cultural theory, and design anthropology has addressed issues of cultural hybridity and intercultural exchange across various cross-cultural contexts. However, while the importance of East-West cross-cultural exchange has been the subject of in-depth research, the role of intra-Asian relationships and encounters in fashion design has been underexplored, particularly regarding Sino-Thai relationships and cultural symbols from both contexts. This research addresses this gap by exploring the processes and contexts in which Chinese and Thai cultural symbols and motifs are re-interpreted by designers in the contemporary fashion design practice, by critically reflecting upon the mechanisms and strategies of cultural translation in creative work. The key areas of research interest within this field include the semiotic and symbolic systems of traditional garments and textiles from the

two cultures, processes and mechanisms of visual translation of cultural symbols in contemporary design, as well as the cultural and ethical consequences of those aesthetic decisions. The existing body of research has been primarily focused on the axis of East-West cultural encounters and exchanges, while the issues of intra-Asian creative work and design have been largely under-theorized and under-researched, particularly in the context of neighboring countries like China and Thailand.

The primary argument of this paper is that fashion design, when sensitively and semiotically approached, can serve as a translator between two distinct and sometimes antagonistic cultural and aesthetic systems, mediating not only between design practices and aesthetics but also creating a space for productive and generative cultural encounters. The research is underpinned by the existing scholarship and theoretical frameworks in the field of fashion studies, cultural theory, and design anthropology, providing a more nuanced understanding of the space of fashion design in the post-global, intercultural context. The study can serve as a theoretically informed framework for practice, as it is equally important for its applied value. The primary target audiences include designers, educators in the field of fashion and design, and policymakers in fashion businesses and institutions. For example, the designer might find this paper useful in expanding their understanding of cultural appropriation and interpretation in a cross-cultural context, while the educator and fashion school administrator could consider cross-cultural fashion design strategies as a part of the educational curriculum. Finally, the policymaker in the fashion industry could use the findings from this study to influence more culturally responsible and ethical business decisions and practices in this increasingly globalized context.

This research, by opening a discussion on the specific Sino-Thai relationship, can contribute to a broader theoretical and conceptual dialogue on fashion design as a space of intercultural recognition and exchange in the post-global condition, as well as provide the audience with some pragmatic suggestions on how to approach cultural exchange in the field of fashion ethically and responsibly.

Objectives

This study investigates how Chinese and Thai cultural symbols are integrated and reinterpreted in fashion design. Drawing from fashion studies, cultural semiotics, and design anthropology, it aims to:

1. Identify and analyze key visual and symbolic elements in traditional Chinese and Thai fashion, including their historical, religious, and sociocultural origins.
2. Examine contemporary design strategies—such as appropriation, adaptation, and transformation—and how they balance preservation with innovation.

3. Develop a typology of cultural integration models (e.g., juxtaposition, fusion, reinterpretation) and assess their aesthetic, cultural, and communicative outcomes.
4. Evaluate the cultural and ethical implications of symbol integration, focusing on cross-cultural perception, identity, and risks of misappropriation.
5. Provide theoretical and practical guidelines for responsible, context-aware intercultural fashion design that fosters cultural dialogue and mutual respect.

Literature review

In today's interconnected design and fashion scene, the emergence of traditional cultural symbols into contemporary design practices is an increasingly conspicuous trend. This literary synthesis will focus on the nuances of how traditional cultural elements, as emblems of collective memory, identity building, and socio-cultural communication, are being channeled into the design innovation process. Synthesizing knowledge from various related research papers will build a broad but integrated reference and background base, as the cornerstone for further research on the subject, and, more specifically, for the potential synthesis and collaboration between Chinese and Thai cultures.

In the academic sphere, the dimensions of traditional visual culture symbols have been the source of inspiration for many researchers. Yang Yi (2025) notes that, in the research of Chinese style design language, all design works should be anchored on the cultural context of China, from which we must derive the spiritual spirit and then express it with the DNA of visual thinking. This orientation should extend from the big brand, design style, and product details, to font design, packaging, and product packaging. The integration of traditional craft art into an epistemological dimension requires moving beyond conventional tools, techniques, and surface aesthetics toward a deeper engagement with the cultural logic embedded in form, color, and materials. This approach emphasizes the tradition-rooted interpretation of formative concepts, the chromatic logic derived from historical visual culture, and the material system theory that links tangible media to intangible heritage. Studies from diverse but intersecting design perspectives affirm that cultural symbols—whether manifested in physical forms or interpreted through a design lens—are never value-neutral; they carry multiple layers of historical, social, and ideological meaning that shape both the design process and its reception (Xu, 2025).

An aspect of Chinese traditional culture that has emerged in multiple studies is jewelry and accessory design. Fu et al (2025) have created an eye-catching piece of research on the reconstruction of Oriental aesthetics in high-end luxury jewelry, using a sample case of a new collection by the designer Ningbo Liu. The creative exploration and narrative discussed within the study are a great example of reconstructing the Oriental aesthetics that frequently come in a fusion of new symbols of traditional culture in a minimalist setting. The trend seems to

build on a dialectical contrast between cultural traces and contemporary stylistic minimalism. Clunas (1997) puts into research that the Song dynasty's refined sensibility in ink painting—marked by an emphasis on subtle brushwork, spatial harmony, and poetic symbolism—has inspired contemporary jewelry design approaches that translate traditional landscapes into miniature wearable art. In particular, designers have reinterpreted the “Four Famous Mountains” and seasonal avian motifs through micro-space reconstruction, a method that condenses vast pictorial compositions into intricate, three-dimensional forms. This integration merges aesthetic heritage with modern craftsmanship, framing jewelry as a consumable microcosm of national culture. Such works do not merely reference historical art but actively re-narrate it, enabling cultural continuity and identity expression through intimate, personal adornment.

Chinese visual motifs and handicraft techniques, used as a main reference in the work of jewelry designers, are another commonly covered research topic by authors of both art and design scopes. Wang & Zhang (2023), in the article on traditional Chinese clothing culture to be pursued in jewelry design and production, assert that the traditional aesthetic rules and motifs in Chinese clothing, ranging from spatial symmetry, symbolic color palettes, to the construction of mythical motifs, can serve as a reference when designers implement jewelry works. Liu et al (2025) further underline the strong contrast of the Buddhist artistic style, such as the common aesthetic motifs of flying apsaras, reaching auspicious clouds, and infinite numbers, and how they can be elevated and creatively interpreted by jewelry designers. The overall aesthetic style that these authors (as well as others on a similar topic) emphasize is the cultural signifiers for the range of philosophical and cosmological concepts in the Chinese thought system, i.e., Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

Incorporating Thai Culture and Design

In order to cover the intercultural aspect of the task, similar knowledge has been accumulated on the Thai culture and its application in the field of fashion design. Thai culture, unlike Chinese culture, has a much more moderate influence of Buddhism. Instead, the religious doctrine has largely remained within the Theravāda school. In addition to this, there is an animism influence on the whole Thai nation, as well as several specific handicraft patterns typical to certain areas of Thailand. Within the body of research work that the Thai cultural studies have generated, there are certain authors whose knowledge would be complementary to the coverage of their Chinese counterparts. One such scholar is Phothirat (2024), who created a detailed analysis of the traditional Thai motifs and their implementation into modern Thai fashion design. Phothirat emphasizes that such traditional Thai symbols as the Kanok, which are traditionally a geometric pattern on palace or temple buildings, and lotus flowers, which are explicitly Buddhist elements in the Thai culture, have found their interpretations and applications in modern Thai fashion design. It is noted that these symbols,

among others, while reflecting the spiritual aspects of life, have also become a representation of the Thainess, the Thai national and cultural identity, based on the Buddhist cosmology and local folklore, and nature. The Thai craftsmanship has also played a central role in the development of Thai fashion design, and silk weaving and embroidery have been especially important as both traditional handicrafts and as part of the modern production.

To better understand how traditional Thai motifs were used in fashion design, Pornmuttawarong & Utiswannakul, (2017) analyzed the symbolic role of Buddhist images in Thai fashion, with a specific example of Buddhist gold, floral patterns, and motifs in fashion design, and, more specifically, of the Naga, or the protective serpent that is a very common image across Southeast Asian Buddhist cultures. It was found that, in this case, Thai culture was using the Buddhist symbolism with a modern twist that decontextualized these sacred elements and pushed them into the fashion production environment. In this way, Thai culture has been challenging the boundaries between the sacred and the secular with the traditional Thai motifs, which had been initially strictly codified and positioned into a binary either-or framework of usage.

Thai Culture Meets Chinese Culture

At this point, it should also be noted that while Chinese authors and the general Sino-centric coverage of the topic have been a major frame of reference for the theoretical and background research for this paper, there are also some important counter-frames. The dominant focus on Chinese cultural integration, its Asiatic context, as well as a critical understanding of the power dynamics and the ethical questions arising from cultural appropriation in intercultural fashions are the issues that remain to be integrated into the following theoretical chapters. Dong (2024), in the study on consumer expectation of culturally blended apparel products using the Kano-model theory, divided the surveyed customers and their apparel expectations into three categories: basic expectation, performance expectation, and excitement expectation. In other words, the relationship between a traditional Chinese cultural symbol and its designer modernization can be divided along this continuum. When speaking of the potential or existing collision between Chinese and Thai visual cultures in the same design environment, this framework will be key to understanding and unpacking the overlapping and conflicting expectations of design functionality.

In the domain of design anthropology, Bhabha (2024) has written extensively about the postcolonial aspects of cross-cultural creative design, including the specific motifs of cultural hybridity. When studying the interface between the two traditions, Chinese and Thai, and its specific implications in a design and fashion context, such critical knowledge will be very important to frame the discussion around how these cultural elements are not only blended creatively but are also politically and ethically repositioned. Designers will have to face, as

this theoretical background will show, a much more complex practice, in which the issue of cross-cultural integration will go far beyond simply borrowing and mixing different aesthetics.

Research Gap

The existing knowledge and research on Chinese traditional culture in the design and fashion production have largely set the theoretical stage, including the area of traditional symbols and cultural emblems, their meaning and application in fashion design, as well as their cultural contextualization. What remains to be filled by the current study, however, is the gap in research that focuses on the collision of cultural symbols in a more intra-Asian exchange. While the literature has accumulated a lot of knowledge on the East-West design dialogue, very little has been said about the visual complexity of Chinese and Thai traditions meeting in a common space. Fashion design, with its visual and semiotic complexity, which has been discussed in the literature above, is a potential dialogical environment in which these elements could coexist, provided that they are translated through the prism of semiotic, symbolic, and material complexities that have already been emphasized by the existing literature.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework that anchors this research is built on an interdisciplinary nexus that engages with the principles of fashion design theory, cultural semiotics, and cross-cultural communication. The theoretical structure forms a critical analysis of how Chinese and Thai cultural symbols, steeped in their distinct aesthetic, religious, and historical values, may be dissected, recombined, and recontextualized through the praxis of fashion design to reach a harmonious state of cultural integration. It does not merely consider cultural fusion as an aesthetic blending, but as a deeper and recursive dialogue—a conversation of signs that negotiate meanings, identities, and values in layered complexity.

Central to this framework is Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model (Hall, 1980), as it offers a baseline structure for understanding the complex relationship between the cultural encoders (designers) and decoders (audiences). Designers, as encoders, imbue garments with meanings through forms, symbols, and motifs, which are, in turn, decoded by the audiences or wearers based on their socio-cultural predispositions. This bi-directional process is essential to the framework for measuring how far and if the transfer of cultural elements reaches recognition or ends up as cultural distortion.

Accompanying Hall's structural model is the study's adoption of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). In this way, the research perceives cultural identity not as static and monolithic, but as fluid and negotiated in a "third space" (p. 211). In the space of fashion design, this third space functions as the in-between where Chinese and Thai visual and symbolic systems don't just meet or coexist but where they co-create,

amalgamating in hybridized forms that defy essentialist interpretation. The hybrid garment becomes a negotiated entity, a wearable artifact of cultural interplay, which carries syncretic values while attempting to retain symbolic authenticity.

From a design-centric perspective, the framework subsumes Roland Barthes' approach to visual semiology (Barthes, 1977) to inform the structural understanding of garments and accessories as sign systems. Fashion, in this respect, is not just an object or a commodity but a structure of communication in which the relationship between signifiers (such as color, patterns, and silhouettes) and signifieds (meanings, values, and ideologies) is actively shaped. The application of semiotics in this study aims to reveal how Chinese and Thai symbols (the phoenix, Kanok) are repositioned within the narratives of contemporary fashion design and how their meanings transform in terms of form, context, and usage.

Design Anthropology also underpins the framework, thus accounting for the socio-cultural context in which design is produced and consumed. The dimension reveals the practice of fashion design as deeply embedded in cultural processes like ritual, identity performance, and socio-political narratives. Elements of culture are not merely translated visually; they are mediated through everyday lived experience, historical trauma, aspiration, and collective memory. For example, Thai Buddhist symbolism and Chinese imperial iconography, when merged, must be read not only in visual but also in historical and structural terms that address the power dynamics and cultural hierarchies they symbolize.

Structurally, the framework unfolds on three interrelated analytical levels, each expanding on the other:

Symbolic Level – The identification and classification of cultural symbols, motifs, and visual idioms, specific to Chinese and Thai traditions.

Aesthetic-Functional Level – The study of how these symbols are translated through garment construction, textile manipulation, and stylistic choices, and how they interact and communicate within the ecosystem of a single design narrative.

Cultural-Interpretive Level – The decoding of audience reception, cultural resonance, and the examination of potential ethical friction points, such as cultural appropriation, distortion, or commodification of sacred or sensitive cultural elements.

Together, the three dimensions form a composite framework in which this study will trace the pathways of cultural collision and symbiosis not as isolated design choices but as conscious intercultural design strategies. This conceptual lens allows for an in-depth exploration of how fashion design, as an artistic and cultural practice, can mediate between tradition and modernity, self and other, heritage and innovation.

Cultural Integration Framework for Chinese-Thai Symbols in Fashion Design

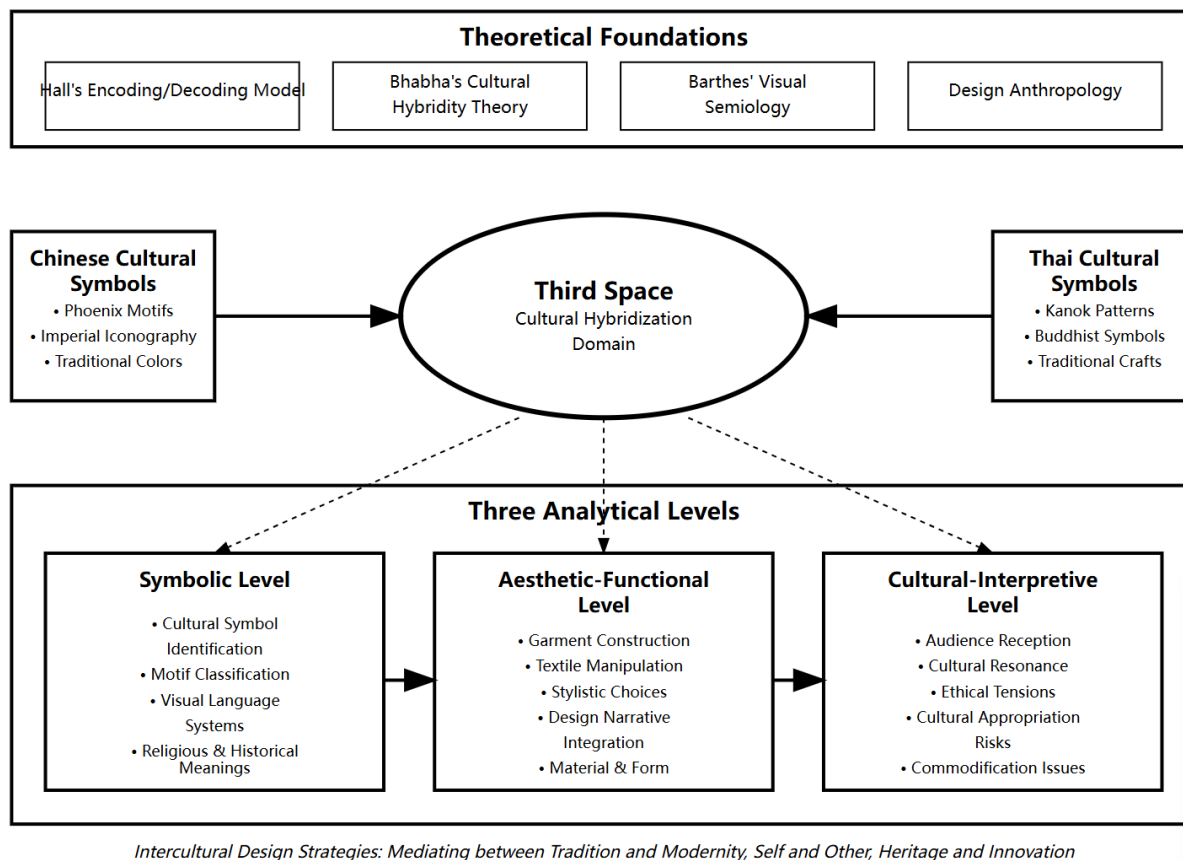


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This article adheres to the qualitative, interpretivist approach based on interdisciplinary theory and methodology from fashion studies, cultural semiotics, and design anthropology. The rationale for the methodological orientation was to find the elaborate cultural meanings in fashion artifacts and interpret the processes behind their dialogues to reveal how the symbols in Chinese and Thai cultures clash, collide, and coexist in fashion design practice. The primary goal was to seek not generalizable but context-sensitive and process-sensitive theories about the intercultural integration in design.

1. Research Design

The case study design was applied as the research method. The number of cases is multiple for a reason that the case study approach is appropriate for the phenomenon of intercultural fashion design in the given context, which may not be generalized because of its cultural and symbolic context-sensitivity. The design strategy was then employed to determine the objects of analysis. The focus was placed on selected fashion collections, garments, and accessory works that overtly reference both Chinese and Thai cultural symbols.

The emphasis is given to studying how cultural symbols are expressed in the material, formal, and ideological dimensions of fashion design. The cross-case comparison of this multi-case design allowed for to application of the theoretical abstraction later in the research, that is, to look for the typologies of how the cultural symbols from the two different contexts are being merged in design work.

2. Data Collection

(a) Visual and Material Analysis, The sample of fashion works being analyzed in this study consists of 12 artifacts. They are all visualized objects, including fashion garments and accessories collected from independent designers, fashion shows, and museum archives, both in China and Thailand. The sampling rationales about the works were their referencing both Chinese and Thai cultural symbols, such as the Chinese dragon and phoenix, cloud patterns, the Thai Kanok pattern, forms of lotus flowers, and traditional Thai weaving techniques. The time frame for the selection of the works was from the beginning of the 21st century to the date of the study in order to focus on the contemporary cases of cross-cultural design in fashion. The works selected for the sample are by both established and emerging designers. Each of the 12 pieces is analyzed in terms of semiotic deconstruction of its elements, that is, color palette, silhouette, texture, material, and iconic symbols. The purpose is to find out the ways the traditional cultural symbols are reinterpreted in the forms and functions of each work and thereby create a visual hybrid language.

(b) Designer Interviews, The semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 6 designers (3 in China and 3 in Thailand), who are also engaged in cross-cultural or heritage-based design practices. The sampling rationales for choosing these designers are their prominence in the design field, engagement with Chinese and Thai cultural references, and experience in intercultural design in fashion. The interviews are conducted to understand their cultural intentions, cultural frames of interpretation, design processes, and ethical considerations regarding the appropriation or fusion of cultural elements.

(c) Audience Reception Analysis, The triangulation of the research included the audience reception analysis with a focus group of 20 fashion consumers (10 Chinese and 10 Thai) as well. The sampling rationales for these group members are that the sample needs to be demographically diverse to be inclusive of different age groups, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds, and to give a variety of perspectives on how hybrid fashion works are perceived by different segments of society. The focus group members are shown selected hybrid fashion pieces and asked to share their perceptions, emotional responses, and cultural interpretations of them. It was done to evaluate the effectiveness of the symbolic communication across cultural borders as well as to detect any misunderstandings or conflicts.

3. Analytical Framework

The data analysis was carried out through coding in three stages:

Open Coding: The first step involved open coding, where recurring motifs, symbolic references, and aesthetic choices are identified across cases.

Axial Coding: Establish relationships between design strategies and types of cultural integration (e.g., juxtaposition, fusion, reinterpretation).

Selective Coding: Theoretical abstraction around integration models, guided by the conceptual lens of cultural hybridity and semiotics.

Additionally, cross-case synthesis will be employed to compare the results of each case and look for patterns or variations. The point is to create not generalizable across the whole industry but analytically generalizable typologies of cultural integration within the case of the Sino-Thai design context.

4. Ethical Considerations

Considering the culturally sensitive nature of this research, particularly concerning the symbolic appropriation of potentially sacred or national motifs, ethical concerns have been considered throughout the process. Designers were given the right to review and verify the accuracy of their interview data, and visual materials used in the audience testing were sourced with full rights and attribution. The study also remained critical of the issues of power asymmetry, cultural misrepresentation, and commodification of tradition.

5. Limitations

As the research uses the qualitative methodological approach, it comes with the general limits of qualitative research, such as its limitations in scope and representativeness. In this case study, more attention is given to the high-concept fashion and high design, which may not reflect on commercial or mass-market considerations. The complex area of research, such as linguistic and cultural translation between Chinese and Thai symbolic systems, also requires more in-depth scholarly attention in the future.

Results

Interviews with the designers and the focus group session with the audiences were the main sources to construct the findings, along with the visual analyses conducted on the garments. The following sections will report the findings and are classified into three categories, which are the reconstruction of symbols and motifs, strategies of integration, and responses of the audiences. These three sets of findings present an image that the meeting between Chinese and Thai cultures and their representation through fashion does not move along one line, but takes on multiple ways that vary according to different logics of design.

1. Reconstruction of Symbols and Motifs

The semiotic transformation of the motifs and symbols is the most visible aspect of the findings. Chinese cloud and dragon motifs, which are symbols of imperial power and a metaphor for transcendence, often lose their shape and take the form of abstract, amorphous

patterns in the clothes. The cloud and dragon patterns are usually implemented through digital embroidery or laser-cutting, so that the original symbols are now transformed into trendy motifs that resemble sequins or confetti. In the case of the Thai Kanok flame pattern, which is originally a flame motif commonly found in Buddhist objects and temple decorations, the pattern appears in the design as abstracted geometric forms while it retains its connotation as a sacred symbol.

A process of filtering down is observed in the way both Chinese and Thai designers include cultural symbols in their designs. In the filtering-down process, cultural symbols and elements are not transferred as wholes into fashion design, but are transformed through a form of aesthetic reduction, where the visual elements are modified and simplified, but the symbolic meanings are often preserved. Designers do not always follow a logic of replication, but an aesthetic practice that is based on the interpretation and adaptation of the concept.





2. Integration Strategies: Models of Cultural Fusion

The study presented three models of cultural integration in the Sino-Thai fashion, which differentially impact the audience perception and emotional experience. The models can be described as follows:

(a) Parallel Juxtaposition

The parallel juxtaposition presents Chinese and Thai (design) elements as two parallel lines of a garment, a collection, or a visual identity. They are visually and spatially connected but do not combine into a visual unit. For example, Chinese silk knot buttons next to Thai brocade trim on a jacket. Designers preferred this model in instances where they were inclined to preserve the autonomy and recognizability of each system.

Impact on Audience Interpretation: This model is easily legible to audience members familiar with one or both of the cultural systems; they are also able to appreciate the individuality of Chinese and Thai elements. However, this model tends to yield a weaker emotional response in audience members due to the lack of deep interaction with cultural symbols.

Example: A traditional Chinese silk robe with Thai woven patterns used as an accent piece. The audience will likely perceive and respect the individuality of each cultural element, which might yield a neutral or detached emotional response.

(b) Symbolic Fusion

Symbolic fusion represents a more mature model in which symbols are blended into new or layered morphologies or hybrid visual identities are created. One designer showed a dress with a hanfu silhouette but with a fabric pattern made from a mashup of the Thai lotus and Chinese cloud spirals; this represented a mixing of spiritual symbolism from Mahayana and Theravāda Buddhism. Symbolic fusion is achieved when cultural commonalities are more salient and can be foregrounded.

Impact on Audience Interpretation: Hybrid Sino-Thai designs based on this model tend to resonate emotionally with audience members and be perceived as more sophisticated and highbrow in aesthetic. Audience members are able to extract and identify a cultural value that both systems share.

Example: A textile with the Thai lotus and Chinese cloud spiral motif melded into one image. The resulting design might be evocative and stimulate an emotional response from the audience. Due to the seamless nature of the fusion, audience members may feel a greater sense of connectedness or familiarity.

(c) Functional Reinterpretation

Functional reinterpretation refers to the model in which adaptive cultural translation is the core component; motifs and symbols from one culture are excised from their historical-material associations and reconfigured into a new material or functional expression. For

example, Thai temple mural iconography reinterpreted as abstract prints on polyester raincoats, or Chinese zodiac signs reimagined as detachable pendants. This model can be associated with an engagement with transcultural function and the notion of adaptive or responsive design between heritage culture and contemporary global aesthetics.

Impact on Audience Interpretation: Functional reinterpretation tends to elicit curiosity and a sense of intrigue from audience members as they recognize cultural symbols they are familiar with in a new context. It may also yield an intellectual response as opposed to an immediate emotional connection; however, the creativity of the reinterpretation process and results can lead to feelings of innovation or appreciation.

Example: A necklace with Chinese zodiac symbols that can be detached and rearranged as pendants. The design is innovative and blends functionality with traditional cultural symbols. The audience may be intrigued by the creativity of the design and be interested in learning more about the use of cultural symbols.

3. Interpretation by Audience

Focus group results indicate that audience reception of such designs will be largely dependent on their cultural legibility and the symbolic literacies of the viewer. Chinese focus group members seemed to be more responsive to subtle visual cues, such as the line quality of clouds, or the silhouette of dynasty-specific elements, for example. In contrast, Thai audiences were noted to respond more emotively to the color palette or repeated patterns, which evoked the Buddhist temple tradition. In each case, it was noted that hybrid design images that skewed towards integration were received with a higher emotional response, and with the impression of a more "designerly" approach than the parallel collages.

Impact on Emotional Response: The level of integration of cultural symbols within the design has a direct impact on emotional response. Hybrid designs that establish a clear and meaningful connection between the cultures involved are more likely to engage the audience on a deeper, more reflective level.

Limitations: Some audience members, particularly those less familiar with the "source culture" of a hybrid symbol, reported feelings of confusion or ambivalence in the face of the symbol's complex narrative, if such framing was not provided by cultural mediation devices such as labels, storytelling, or designer commentary.

Discussion

The results of this study highlight that design interpretation and integration methods in fashion significantly help in revealing the symbolic complexity and integration tactics utilized in the adoption and adaptation of Chinese and Thai cultural symbols in clothing design. The results offer a nuanced way to understand cultural hybridity in practice by observing how these symbols have been actively reconstructed through various design choices. They also

help validate the theoretical foundations of cultural hybridity and symbolic reconstruction, while contributing an empirical framework of a contextualized, design-oriented model of intercultural synthesis. These can be better appreciated from four different perspectives: symbolic agency, aesthetic negotiation, cultural ethics, and communicative efficacy.

1. Symbolic Agency and Cultural Repositioning

The transformation of religious motifs (Thai Kanok flame or Chinese dragon), political symbols (mountain-like shapes or stars), and abstract designs (intricate floral patterns or geometric shapes) into hybridized shapes and elements is an example of how fashion can be a site for exercising symbolic agency. The original religious or political symbolism of these elements is not completely erased but is repositioned within a different semiotic order that reflects a new set of values, taste hierarchies, and identity aspirations.

From the perspective of Hall's encoding/decoding model, these designers are not just passively reproducing existing cultural messages but are actively encoding revised, if not speculative, versions of those messages—messages that may not always adhere to a literal or historical definition of “heritage”, but instead to the designer's vision for how it could be reimagined to engage with contemporary identity politics, cosmopolitan aesthetics, and even market demand. The hybrid fashion product can then be said to function as a semiotic interface that both preserves and negotiates between the meaning of the “authentic” cultural memory and its newer, aestheticized versions. The idea of designers as interpreters of culture is supported by recent research from both Thailand and China. These studies show that designers in both countries are diversifying in their cultural choices, often using design to express cultural identity or cosmopolitan status by drawing on a variety of cultural symbols from different sources, both global and local (Phothirat, 2024; Xu, 2025).

2. Aesthetic Negotiation and Hybridity in Practice

The three models of integration—parallel juxtaposition, symbolic fusion, and functional reinterpretation—can also be seen as three pragmatic strategies of aesthetic negotiation. Each of them signals a different degree of cultural entanglement and pragmatic approach to how the design of the Chinese and Thai symbols and elements has to be preserved or reinvented to fit the needs of the new design context.

Symbolic fusion especially echoes Homi Bhabha's idea of the “third space” (Bhabha, 1994) as an interstitial space of cultural creation. It is here that hybridity is not merely tolerated but celebrated and exploited as a resource for cultural and creative innovation. Fusion allows for the production of objects that are not “Chinese” nor “Thai,” but that are both, that draw from both, and that, through their sheer existence, suggest a new way of cohabiting and coexisting through a shared design language. This is, of course, a complex and delicate process that needs to be sensitive to the designer's own cultural literacy and personal investment as well as to the visual balance between the competing elements and to the semantic integrity

of the final composition. These general observations on aesthetic negotiation in hybrid fashion have been addressed in the work of global fashion scholars who have noted the benefits and challenges of mixing different cultural aesthetics in fashion and the importance of doing so with a responsible, informed approach. This research also has connections to several other studies from China and Thailand. These studies found that fashion design often involves a blending of indigenous aesthetics with modern design forms, and that it can serve as a means for cultural preservation and innovation (Clunas, 1997).

3. Ethical Considerations in Cultural Translation

The third and possibly the most important insight the study has offered is the question of ethics. While functional reinterpretation allows the most creative freedom and market versatility, it is also most prone to symbolic loss and flattening. The lack of proper context, cultural mediation, and explanation might not only lead to confusion and dilution of the original symbolic meanings of the integrated elements but might even go as far as cultural misappropriation when sacred or politically loaded symbols are stripped of their critical value and turned into passive signifiers.

The responsibility of the designer, then, is not only that of an aesthete, curator, or fashion forecaster. Designers in a world of intercultural encounter and creative economy must also be cultural translators and cultural stewards. This is especially the case when working with traditional cultures and requires an understanding not just of their surface-level aesthetics but of their ontological logic and socio-cultural trajectories. Symbolic integration without this can easily become exploitative, extractive, and shallow rather than collaborative, dialogic, and mutually enriching. The research conducted in both Thailand and China often reported similar issues of commodification and decontextualization of cultural symbols (Dong, 2024). As the ethical implications of these practices gain more visibility, the discourse around cross-cultural design is increasingly emphasizing the importance of sensitivity to the cultural context to avoid misappropriation or cultural harm.

4. Communicative Efficacy and Audience Perception

The variation in audience reactions and interpretations also shows that legibility is not a given, but is rather conditioned by certain factors. Hybridity of form does not always equate to hybridity of meaning. Semantic cohesion is as important as formal cohesion. It may require further framing techniques to orient the spectator and avoid misreading. In this sense, fashion design can also benefit from the incorporation of cultural communication theory in its methodologies. A hybrid fashion does not speak by itself but with a language. Where the language is not shared or is incomplete, even well-meaning and creative fusion can be misinterpreted or, worse, rejected outright. In this sense, the designer also has the responsibility of the curator and even the pedagogue. This is in line with the arguments made by global fashion scholars, who have written that the cultural communication aspects of

fashion must be considered and their messages clearly defined if they are to be received properly (Huang, 2023). Furthermore, both the Chinese and Thai fashion designers are also finding it necessary to take into account the need for clearer communication of the cultural references of hybrid fashion (Liu et al, 2025).

To conclude, this article has demonstrated that fashion design, when problematized, can be a powerful site of cultural negotiation and semiotic innovation. However, it has also served as a warning about the potential excesses of hybridity and the traps of superficial symbolic play. Design as a mode of cultural integration and synthesis needs to be more than eclectic or surface-level in its understanding and execution. It must also be cognizant of its ethics, aesthetics, and semiotics. It is only through this multidimensional and responsible approach that fashion can hope to make a positive contribution to intercultural communication and understanding in our increasingly divided world. The findings of this research support and deepen the previous and ongoing research in Thailand and China, while also connecting with the broader scholarly conversations in other parts of the world.

Conclusion

This project primarily explores the cross-cultural creation potential of fashion design as a vernacular practice by examining how visual resources and symbols from Chinese and Thai cultures can be integrated into contemporary clothing design. Through examining the images designers, as well as the meanings attached to them by designers and audiences, the current project has shown how cultural integration in fashion design is as much about the designer's choice of symbols as it is about how these symbols are recontextualised, semiotically transformed, aesthetically recoded, and positioned along ethical and authorial lines. The three modes of cultural integration identified in this project- parallel juxtaposition, symbolic fusion, and functional reinterpretation-provide useful mapping tools for examining how visual symbols are enmeshed in different ways through design, highlighting not just issues of cross-cultural entanglement but also the nature of cultural authorship in fashion design. While the visual fusion and juxtaposition of cultural symbols from different sources can result in interesting hybrid design languages that blur geographical or historical boundaries of origin, such a process of hybridisation of symbols can be meaningful and creative only when there is a high level of cultural literacy, reflexivity, and sensitivity to context among designers. Furthermore, this project has argued that purposeful fusion of cultural symbols across fashion design should not be reduced to stylistic pastiche but should also be founded on an informed sense of criticality of heritage, audience, and symbolic function, allowing the practice of fashion design to be a site for intercultural understanding, rearticulation of identity, and new modes of sustainable cultural creativity in the post-global condition. The encounter and merging of Chinese and Thai visual culture through the lens of fashion design has opened up

new possibilities for creative expression in this field, but has also allowed for intercultural empathy to develop.

Recommendation

In conclusion, based on the above findings, it is recommended to further consider the following conclusions and recommendations for future practice, education, industry, and academic study.

1. Recommendations for Practicing Designers

Designers interested in similar intercultural projects are encouraged to keep in mind the following considerations in their design process:

- Cultural elements should be treated as forms of visual communication with cultural, spiritual, and ideological meanings, rather than purely aesthetic ornaments. This entails a commitment to cultural immersion and ethnographic learning rather than second-hand representations of “the other” or abstract cultural styles and aesthetics.
- Designers are encouraged to consult cultural practitioners, artisans, historians, and scholars from both Chinese and Thai contexts to gain a deeper understanding of the meanings and functions of the symbolic elements they wish to integrate.
- The design process should include steps of self-reflexivity, such as critical mapping of the origins, histories, and current uses of the symbols, assessing their contextual relevance and potential sociopolitical implications, and avoiding the use of sacred, religious, or politically sensitive symbols without appropriate cultural consultation or permission.

2. Recommendations for Design Education Institutions

Design education institutions in both China and Thailand should consider the following recommendations to better prepare students for cross-cultural design practice:

- Design education curricula can be reimagined and reconfigured to better equip students to meet the challenges and opportunities of cross-cultural design integration and creation.
- Schools can integrate modules on cultural semiotics, heritage theory, and postcolonial critique into their core design pedagogy to help students understand design as not only form and function, but also as cultural discourse.
- Schools can facilitate more project-based cross-cultural collaboration, such as co-studios with partner design schools in China or Thailand, field-based learning in traditional craft villages or markets, or hybrid mentorship systems that pair students with local artisans.

3. Recommendations for Industry and Policy

Design industry stakeholders and policymakers in both China and Thailand should also be aware of the following recommendations to better support and promote the growth of intercultural design practices and products:

- Government bodies, fashion councils, and cultural foundations in both China and Thailand should consider creating more platforms and opportunities for formalizing intercultural design collaboration between designers and institutions.

- Both Chinese and Thai governments could play a key role in initiating bilateral cultural design programs and funding opportunities for co-created collections, exhibitions, and publications that showcase the work of hybrid designers or hybrid design practices.

- Digital archives or open-access databases of Chinese and Thai cultural motifs and symbols, annotated with historical context and usage guidelines, could also be a valuable resource for designers seeking to incorporate cultural material into their work.

4. Recommendations for Business and Commercial Development

Businesses interested in producing and selling the integrated design products described above may also benefit from the following considerations and recommendations:

- Businesses should also consider investing in research and development (R&D) to explore new materials and design techniques that could more deeply integrate traditional cultural elements and motifs with contemporary fashion trends and technologies.

- Partnerships with cultural institutions and local artisans in both China and Thailand could also lead to more authentic and responsible product development.

- Fashion brands should also consider being more transparent with their customers about how cultural elements are sourced, integrated, and credited in their design process, and should ensure fair compensation for artisans whose work is used or adapted.

- Cross-cultural design products may also have significant commercial value in global markets beyond China and Thailand, where consumers are increasingly seeking products that have meaning, depth, and cultural richness. Digital marketing strategies that tell the story of how cultural elements are fused with modern design could further engage and attract consumers.

5. Recommendations for Future Academic Inquiry

The findings of this research also point toward several recommendations for future academic inquiry in the same field. It would be good for scholars to expand the field of research on the cultural integration of traditional motifs and symbols in fashion design beyond binary cultural comparisons between Chinese and Thai fashion cultures, toward a broader vision of networked and multidirectional cultural hybridity across the Global South. For example, comparative studies that include Vietnamese, Burmese, Indonesian, or Cambodian design systems and symbolic traditions, especially where there are shared histories of religious, colonial, or diaspora-based transnational interaction, could offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of how fashion functions as a site of transregional cultural negotiation and identity articulation. It would also be interesting for future studies to include audience

ethnography across different cultural and national markets to better understand how cross-cultural fashion design is received, interpreted, accepted, or contested.

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