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From Missionary Needlework Education to Local Craft Industry: Reconfiguring European Lacework in Modern China

Yihan Jin, Yinghao Fan*, Yuankai Ma

School of Art, Soochow University, Suzhou 215000, China

Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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Abstract: This paper examines how European lacework was reconfigured in modern China through missionary-led needlework education, women's vocational craft training, regional textile traditions, and export-oriented production networks. Rather than treating drawnwork as a straightforward instance of Western transmission, this study argues that Chinese actors reshaped the craft through three interrelated mechanisms: pedagogy, technique, and production. Missionaries and church-affiliated institutions initially introduced lace-making as a form of informal vocational training for women in treaty-port regions, including Chaoshan, Yantai, and the lower Yangtze. Local artisans subsequently combined lace structures with Chinese embroidery techniques, creating new relationships among openwork, stitch systems, motifs, and compositional schemes. Finally, these training networks developed into dispersed production systems and export-oriented industries supported by merchants, the circulation of patterns, and regional specialization. By foregrounding mechanisms rather than exhaustive chronology, this paper shows that cross-cultural craft exchange operated through education, labor, and market mediation, thereby turning an imported technique into a localized craft industry in modern China.

Keywords: Drawnwork; Lacework; Craft education; Women's labor; Cross-cultural craft exchange; Modern China; Export craft

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1. Introduction

Since the opening of the treaty ports in the second half of the nineteenth century, Sino-Western craft exchange was rarely reducible to a straightforward process of importation and reception. Objects, techniques, patterns, and forms of knowledge circulated under unequal political conditions and through missionary institutions, commercial networks, local labor systems, and overseas markets. In the case of modern Chinese drawnwork, the central question is therefore not simply when European lacework entered China. More importantly, it is

how an imported needlework practice passed through missionary instruction, charitable training, women's domestic labor, local embroidery traditions, and export trade before becoming a localized craft characterized by regional styles and increasingly organized modes of production. To describe this history merely as the introduction of a Western technique would obscure the social, educational, and material processes that made its transmission and transformation possible [1,2].

This paper argues that modern Chinese drawnwork should be understood as a cross-cultural craft formed through three interrelated mechanisms: pedagogical transmission, technical and aesthetic reconfiguration, and production and market organization. Missionaries and church-affiliated institutions first introduced European lace-making through needlework instruction, charitable manual training, and livelihood-oriented education for women. Local makers subsequently incorporated these techniques into existing systems of embroidery, pattern making, material knowledge, and domestic handwork. These reconfigured practices were then organized through merchant networks, distributed household production, pattern circulation, regional specialization, and export trade. Education, technical localization, and industrial development were therefore not separate historical processes. They constituted successive but overlapping phases in the transformation of European lacework into a Chinese craft tradition and economic resource.

Within this framework, education does not refer narrowly to a formal school curriculum. It encompasses missionary needlework instruction, church-based manual training, charitable skill transmission, demonstration, pattern imitation, situated correction, and localized networks of female craft learning. Recent studies of lace and craft have shown that textile knowledge is often transmitted through embodied practice, tacit judgment, repeated material engagement, and forms of women's labor that remain only partially visible in institutional archives [3–7]. These observations make it necessary to examine not only who introduced lace-making, but also how learners acquired, interpreted, reproduced, and modified its techniques.

To clarify this process, the paper draws selectively on John Dewey's theory of experience. Dewey regarded education not as the passive transfer of completed knowledge, but as a process in which knowledge develops through the interaction between learners and their material and social environments. He further emphasized the continuity of experience: new learning is shaped by previous habits and knowledge, while present experience influences the possibilities of future action [7–10]. From this perspective, Chinese women who learned European lacework should not be treated as empty recipients of foreign techniques. Their previous experience of sewing, embroidery, pattern recognition, textile handling, and household production provided an experiential basis through which imported methods could be interpreted and reorganized.

Dewey's theory is employed here as an analytical framework rather than as evidence of direct historical influence. This paper does not claim that the missionary institutions discussed below consciously followed Deweyan educational principles. Nor does it equate practical activity automatically with meaningful education. As Dewey cautioned, experience can be educative when it expands the learner's capacity for further perception, judgment, and action, but it can also be restrictive when it narrows subsequent possibilities [7,10,11]. This distinction is important for understanding missionary needlework training. Such training could provide women with technical knowledge, income-generating skills, and new forms of participation, while simultaneously incorporating them into low-paid, home-based, and gendered systems of labor. A Deweyan perspective therefore helps explain both the productive possibilities and the social limitations of craft education.

The introduction of this perspective also changes how technical localization is understood. Rather than

treating education as a preliminary stage that ended once European techniques had been transmitted, this paper proposes that localization began within the learning process itself. Demonstration, imitation, repetition, correction, and material experimentation did not result in the mechanical reproduction of a fixed European model. They brought foreign lace structures into contact with Chinese stitch systems, motif vocabularies, compositional habits, and forms of labor organization. Craft learning thus became one of the principal sites in which European lacework was reconfigured as Chinese drawnwork.

The paper uses Chaoshan, Yantai, and the lower Yangzi as selective evidentiary sites rather than as components of an exhaustive regional chronology. This method follows scholarship that employs specific material and regional cases to investigate hidden labor, design pedagogy, skilled practice, and production networks [3,5,12]. Chaoshan illustrates the transformation of church-affiliated charitable instruction into an export-oriented craft industry. Yantai demonstrates how lace-making was combined with embroidery, drawn-thread work, and braiding within a northern regional tradition. The lower Yangzi shows how Shanghai's commercial networks, Catholic institutions, training practices, and circulation of patterns connected local learning with wider markets. Together, these cases bring art history and craft history into dialogue with the history of education and labor.

The purpose of this study is therefore not to celebrate an abstract "fusion of East and West." Instead, it identifies the concrete educational, technical, social, and commercial mechanisms through which European lacework was retaught, materially reworked, aesthetically redesigned, and economically reorganized in modern China. Its central claim is that craft education was not merely the channel through which a foreign technique entered local society. It was also a site of experiential reconstruction in which imported knowledge was transformed into embodied skill, regional design capacity, gendered labor, and eventually a localized craft industry.

2. Missionary needlework education and women's craft training

In China, drawnwork initially emerged not as a mature industry but as a socially embedded craft practice. It entered local society through mission work, charitable intervention, and women's livelihood strategies. The Chaoshan case is especially instructive in this regard. In the 1880s, women associated with the American Baptist and British Presbyterian missions in Shantou began teaching European embroidery and lace-making techniques to local female believers. Their purpose was not limited to the transmission of aesthetic forms. Rather, it also involved helping poor women acquire income-generating skills that could be practiced at home, while generating support for girls' education [1]. This suggests that the early spread of drawnwork in China cannot be adequately described as a sequence of "market first, education later." Rather, educational and charitable craft training produced the initial learners, organizers, and transmission nodes that enabled the craft to take root.

Evidence from Yantai and the lower Yangzi further shows that this mode of transmission was not unique to Chaoshan but reproducible across different treaty-port and coastal contexts. By the late nineteenth century, Yantai already had mission-affiliated craft schools, as well as documented cases of missionaries instructing local women in lace-making and drawnwork. These activities formed part of a broader effort to provide poor women with manual skills compatible with the spatial and social constraints of domestic life. In the lower Yangzi, by contrast, transmission relied more heavily on Shanghai's commercial circuits and Catholic institutional networks. Church girls' schools, charitable institutions, and local training centers provided lace-

making instruction to orphans, poor women, and rural female workers. The Xiaoshan case of 1919 is especially significant because it shows the transition from charitable instruction to organized local training. By this point, lacework had moved beyond isolated acts of charitable teaching into a more organized local training regime involving tuition, basic stitch instruction, model-pattern imitation, and subsequent diffusion [13,14].

For this reason, missionary needlework education should be understood as an informal yet effective form of vocational skill transmission, rather than as a fully institutionalized school system in the modern sense. Its historical significance lies in its capacity to address two interrelated problems: access to technical knowledge and the organization of labor. European lace-making techniques could not be readily mastered without demonstration, model patterns, and hands-on correction. Recent work on lace schooling, work songs, and tacit knowledge likewise stresses that craft learning depends on demonstration, situated correction, rhythm, and repeated material practice [5,7]. At the same time, drawnwork spread rapidly because it could be embedded within existing structures of women's home-based labor. Missionary education therefore transmitted not only stitches but also the social conditions under which learning and production became linked: who would learn, where work would take place, and how repetitive practice could be converted into income.

Women should therefore not be understood merely as a labor reserve later mobilized by commerce. Rather, they were central actors in the craft's initial introduction, acquisition, circulation, and everyday reproduction. Female missionaries, female believers, poor women learning needlework, and home-based embroiderers collectively constituted a chain of craft transmission. For this reason, education should not be treated as a secondary background to drawnwork history. Without these training networks, the craft's subsequent technical localization and industrial scaling would be difficult to explain. Recent lace scholarship similarly warns that women's handwork is often made invisible in archives even when it sustains technical knowledge, market circulation, and local craft economies [3,4,6].

3. Technical and aesthetic reconfiguration of lacework

If the educational mechanism explains how European lace entered local Chinese society, its capacity to take root depended on technical and aesthetic reconfiguration. Drawnwork may be understood as a craft process that combines subtractive and additive operations. Threads are first withdrawn from the ground fabric according to a design, after which the remaining structure is stabilized and elaborated through edge securing, knotting, embroidery, joining, and the insertion of motifs. This definition indicates that drawnwork is not a single stitch but rather an open technical structure capable of absorbing multiple local techniques. This view is consistent with lace and craft studies that treat technique as a flexible material system rather than a fixed formal category [12,15]. Precisely because this structure was open, artisans in Chaoshan, Yantai, and the lower Yangtze could incorporate regional embroidery practices into it, producing a composite craft that was more complex than the original European models [15].

The Chaoshan material demonstrates this expansive technical structure with particular clarity. Local artisans divided the craft into categories such as withdrawn-thread work, hand braiding, hand embroidery, appliqué, and joining, while also developing an extensive repertoire of stitches through practice. The crucial point is not the exact number of stitches, but the underlying technical logic that organized them. In China, drawnwork ceased to be a simple imitation of imported patterns and was reorganized into a teachable repertoire of techniques that could be separated, recombined, and progressively learned. Yantai presents a related but distinct configuration, in which thread withdrawal, embroidery, and braiding operated in

combination. The coexistence of embroidered, withdrawn-thread, and braided components indicates that northern lacework did not remain a narrow derivative of a single imported method but developed into a multi-stage composite craft [2,16]. This composite structure is a key marker of localization because it shows that Chinese makers absorbed foreign techniques into familiar systems of classification and training.

Aesthetic reconfiguration also occurred at the levels of motif selection and compositional organization. European lace traditions often emphasized floral vines, geometric regularity, and the translucency of openwork structures. In China, this visual logic was not simply displaced by indigenous ornament. Rather, it was layered with peonies, lotus flowers, chrysanthemums, mandarin ducks, longevity characters, fret patterns, and other motifs familiar from Chinese embroidery. More importantly, compositional schemes were adapted to new objects and uses. Independent motifs, continuous borders, fitted compositions, and composite layouts enabled drawnwork to accommodate tablecloths, curtains, bed covers, and garment accessories associated with Western domestic goods, while also incorporating the symbolic density and spatial balance valued in Chinese ornament. Put differently, "fusion" becomes analytically meaningful only when it is located in specific visual and material operations: motifs, borders, voids, layering, and use. The significance of drawnwork lies precisely in the fact that these visual reorganizations can be read from the objects themselves [4,17].

This technical and aesthetic reconfiguration was accompanied by the localization of the production process. Chinese drawnwork commonly involved a multi-stage sequence of pattern tracing, fabric preparation, thread withdrawal, edge securing, braiding, added embroidery, motif insertion, cutting, washing, ironing, and final inspection. Unlike the smaller workshop collaborations typical of many European settings, Chinese coastal production zones gradually distributed these complicated stages across different workers, households, and localities. This arrangement made it possible for drawnwork to remain highly manual while still meeting the demands of large-scale orders. The division of processes did not necessarily diminish the quality of craftsmanship. Instead, it generated specialized nodes of technical expertise. Localization was therefore not merely a matter of Sinicized ornamentation. It also involved the segmentation, standardization, and social embedding of the craft process itself [12,18].

4. From training networks to local export industry

Training networks eventually developed into local industry not merely because techniques had been learned. Rather, networks of learning were subsequently absorbed into merchant systems, order-based production, pattern circulation, and home-based labor organization. Chaoshan offers the clearest example of this conversion. Women in mission networks initially undertook embroidery and production, while male believers handled purchasing, collection, and external trade. Local merchant firms subsequently emerged, and by the 1920s foreign businesses had also entered the drawnwork trade. What had begun as church-affiliated charitable handwork thus gradually moved beyond ecclesiastical control and entered a broader commercial system. Education provided the entry point, but industrialization depended on order organization, trade mediation, and local commercial capital [1].

Equally important, industrialization did not occur simply through factory concentration. Rather, it was realized through dispersed networks of household production. The Chaoshan "company plus peasant household" system shows how firms supplied materials and patterns, women completed different stages of work at home on a piece-rate basis, and intermediaries collected, coordinated, and assembled the finished or

semi-finished products. Relative specialization across counties in thread withdrawal, embroidery, crochet, and finishing indicates that craft scaling did not necessarily conflict with existing local social structures. On the contrary, drawnwork became sustainable precisely because it accommodated the temporal rhythms and spatial constraints of rural women's labor. This also helps explain why the craft flourished in some regions but failed to develop on the same scale in others. Expansion was therefore never a purely technical matter; it depended simultaneously on gender norms, regional economic conditions, and domestic labor regimes.

Yantai and the lower Yangzi reveal two further pathways through which drawnwork became locally industrialized. Yantai demonstrates that northern regions could build on church-based handcraft education to integrate drawnwork, embroidery, and braiding into a diversified export-oriented product system, eventually developing a regional reputation. The lower Yangtze, especially Xiaoshan, highlights the role of Shanghai's trade circuits, fashion information flows, and pattern circulation. The shift from early dependence on foreign sample patterns to later innovation by local pattern masters is especially significant for understanding the maturation of the industry. It suggests that the real sign of industrial maturity was not merely an increase in the number of workers, but the local emergence of design capacity and stylistic judgment [6,13,14]. Without this shift from technical execution to redesign, organization, and export capacity, drawnwork would have remained a form of dependent subcontracting rather than becoming a local craft industry.

For this reason, the local craft industry discussed here should not be equated with either a modern industrial sector or a self-contained workshop tradition. It refers instead to a historical formation situated between handicraft production, commercial networks, and an export-oriented economy. It retained labor-intensive manual production and local aesthetic judgment while entering larger international markets through standardized patterns, segmented processes, distributed orders, and regional coordination. In this sense, drawnwork was not a natural extension of charitable church handwork. It was the result of a continuous conversion from training networks to production networks and, ultimately, to trade networks. Education and industry were therefore not separate lines of development; rather, they were successive and mutually dependent phases within the same historical chain.

5. Conclusion

This paper has interpreted modern Chinese drawnwork as a cross-cultural craft that entered local society through missionary needlework education, was localized through technical and aesthetic reconfiguration, and was industrialized through dispersed production and export networks. Rather than summarizing this process as an abstract fusion of China and the West, this study argues that its historical significance lay in the sustained interaction among educational transmission, women's labor organization, local knowledge absorption, and market mediation.

The significance of Chaoshan, Yantai, and the lower Yangzi lies not in providing an exhaustive regional genealogy but in revealing different local articulations of the same underlying mechanism. The value of drawnwork history therefore lies not only in showing how European lace arrived in China, but also in demonstrating how an imported craft was retaught, remade, redesigned, and ultimately reorganized as both a local tradition and an industrial resource. For a conference situated at the intersection of arts, education, and the humanities, this case is significant because it places education within the history of craft transmission, rather than treating it as a secondary social background. Drawnwork shows that craft education can serve as a medium through which cultural contact is transformed into embodied knowledge, gendered labor, and

regional industrial formation. This interpretation also resonates with recent lace-archive and craft-economy studies that approach lace as a network of hidden labor, tacit knowledge, community coordination, and value production [3,4,6,19].

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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