

# The Application of Traditional Plant Patterns in Modern Clothing Design

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**Abstract:** The development of traditional Chinese patterns is closely related to social development. As a part of traditional Chinese patterns, the application of plant patterns in costume design is also closely related to politics, economy, and culture. The application of plant patterns in costume design in different dynasties has different characteristics. It has become an indispensable part of dress design, and the formed dress culture has a profound influence on modern dress design. The application of traditional plant patterns in modern clothing design can not only increase the beauty and cultural connotation of clothing but also bring the meaning of purifying the soul and edifying the sentiment to the viewers and users. Therefore, based on discussing the development of traditional plant patterns in clothing design, this paper analyzes the meaning of traditional plant patterns in clothing design and puts forward effective strategies to do a good job in the application of traditional plant patterns in modern clothing design.

**Keywords:** Traditional pattern; Plant pattern; Decorative pattern; Clothing design

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## 1. Introduction

The application of traditional Chinese plant patterns to modern clothing design can not only inherit and promote the long history and culture of the Chinese nation but also increase the artistic and aesthetic sense of clothing design, providing clothing designers with more design elements and sources of inspiration. To this end, clothing designers must have a comprehensive understanding of the development process of traditional plant patterns and study the connotations of plant patterns. Reasonable application of plant patterns to clothing design can give appreciators a wonderful visual aesthetic in terms of decoration, craftsmanship, and styling colors<sup>[1]</sup>.

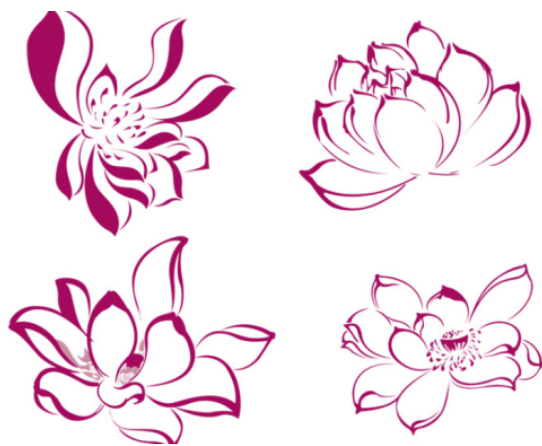
## 2. Overview of the development of traditional plant patterns

Traditional plant patterns which originated from the survival state of plants have a long history in the society

development in China. The transformation of plant patterns into an artistic form has a humanistic meaning. The existence and development of plants are closely related to the development of human beings. There is a saying “First, there is the universe, then everything comes into being” in the “Book of Changes”, which means that there are all things after there were heaven and earth, and there are humans after there were mountains, rivers, and plants, showing the close relation between humans and plants.

Plants, which originally existed as a kind of medicine and food in the course of human development, were used as an art form to decorate human clothing as society developed, thus forming decorative patterns<sup>[2]</sup>. The earliest plant patterns can be traced back to the pottery of the Neolithic period and the bronzes of the Shang and Zhou dynasties. The plant patterns of this period were not the theme patterns. The patterns of this period were mainly geometric patterns, supplemented by some plant patterns.

Decorative plant patterns were used more and more after the Qin and Han Dynasties, despite that, they were just used as accessory patterns for clothing design, such as the lotus patterns and the patterns of crops in sunk panels (**Figure 1**), but not as independent decorative patterns. During the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, plant patterns slowly began to be used as thematic patterns for objects. Besides, many foreign cultures, like Buddhist culture, were introduced to China, so, the plant patterns during this period were diverse. After a long period of integration and development, the development of decorative plant patterns incorporated exotic patterns. The traditional plant patterns of this period have complex patterns and rich colors, such as honeysuckle patterns and lotus patterns. In the Tang Dynasty, with the prosperity and development of politics, economy, and culture, the decorative plant patterns boomed. “Her robe is made of cloud, her face of flowers made”, a poem by Li Bai, reflecting the rich and colorful decorative patterns in the Tang Dynasty. The traditional plant patterns of the Tang Dynasty are rich in oriental connotations.



**Figure 1.** Lotus pattern (Image source: Internet)

And then in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, decorative plant patterns had a certain symbolic meaning. As people gave plant patterns a certain auspicious meaning, they became an art form suiting both refined and popular tastes in China. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, people’s pursuit of the connotation of plant patterns in clothing design reached its peak. For example, in the late Qing Dynasty, blue silk embroidery, crane, flower, and butterfly patterns, and partial patterns of auspicious clothing, the stone blue satin jacket was used as the background color, and colorful silk threads were used to embroider flower, butterfly and crane patterns. The pattern was dominated by a crane with spread wings, surrounded by colorful butterflies and auspicious flowers

of various colors. The needlework was smooth and bright, and the color matching was clear and contrasting, showing the magnificence and nobility of royal clothing (**Figure 2**). It can be seen that the plant patterns were gradually applied to plant fabrics during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, and different decorative patterns and clothing materials were used to reflect the social meaning and social hierarchy. The ancient people used different plant patterns to highlight their social status and identity, therefore, it can be said that the development of spiritual civilization is inseparable from the development of plant patterns <sup>[3]</sup>.



**Figure 3.** Partial view of the double-breasted and auspicious jacket with round crane, flower, and butterfly patterns (Image source: Internet)

### **3. Symbolism of plant patterns in clothing design**

#### **3.1. Moral of one's character**

Since ancient times, Chinese people have been keen on plants and flowers, not only because of the colorful and diverse forms but also because of the different cultural connotations given to different plants and flowers. For example, plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemum symbolize noble ideological character, which complements the concept of “benevolence” advocated by Confucianism in China, and materializes and visualizes the growth characteristics of plants, highlighting the pursuit goals of the Chinese scholar and scholar-bureaucrat.

#### **3.2. Moral of good vision**

Plants such as plum blossoms, peonies, chrysanthemums, and lotuses are often used together to convey beautiful visions through homophones. For example, during the ancient imperial examinations, people often sewed lotus (*Lian*) and herons (*Lu*) for clothing decorations, meaning “pass all the examinations” (*Yi Lu Lian Ke*); goldfish (*Yu*) and lotus (*Lian*) flowers meaning “enough food and treasures every year” (*Nian Nian You Yu*) at the time of annual holidays; bats (*Fu*), pomegranates (many seeds, *Zi*) and peonies meaning “many offsprings and many blessings” in weddings.

#### **3.3. Moral of religion**

The development of traditional plant patterns in China is closely related to political, economic, and historical development, and is also closely related to people's spiritual beliefs. People place their faith in traditional plant patterns and express the human spirit, so, the application of plant patterns in religious art can effectively affect

the spiritual beliefs of the masses<sup>[4]</sup>.

## **4. The application of traditional plant patterns in modern clothing design**

### **4.1. Application of the moral of traditional plant patterns**

To appreciate the traditional plant patterns in modern clothing, not only their appearance could be viewed but also the moral meanings they contain could be understood. Traditional plant patterns are mostly given a strong meaning of vitality, a kind of positive spirit, bringing people optimistic emotion; And some patterns have been endowed with religious culture or auspicious culture. Therefore, the moral that traditional plant patterns express is closely related to Chinese cultural traditions or folk customs, and traditional plant patterns can be used as one of the carriers to inherit Chinese national culture. Applying traditional plant patterns to clothing design can not only reflect the beauty of the plant itself but also highlight the spiritual moral contained therein, making the garment express a profound aesthetic<sup>[5]</sup>.

In modern clothing design, designers prefer to use traditional plant patterns to reflect the artistic sense of clothing to get both aesthetics and art. For example, modern clothing designers use plant patterns such as lotus or plum blossoms to design clothing because plum blossoms have symbolized “happiness in one’s face” since ancient times. Hence, the pattern of magpie on plum blossoms for clothing design shows the connotation of jubilation. Meanwhile, the plum tree blossoms in winter, it has the growth characteristics of cold-proof which is extracted to symbolize the people with high morality and moral courage metaphorically.

### **4.2. Application of the beautiful colors of traditional plant patterns**

There are different techniques to apply traditional plant patterns to modern clothing, for example, aesthetic colors of these patterns are used for clothing design to reflect the characteristics of gorgeous, colorful, and diverse. On different occasions, people can wear clothing in different colors, such as bright and gorgeous, elegant and beautiful, or simple and natural<sup>[6]</sup>. China’s traditional clothing is also unique in terms of color use, focusing on contrasting color matching, rarely using high-purity colors, and mainly using intermediate colors. Especially in terms of the color design of clothing, there is only one main color with other colors serving as a contrast or foil.

In Chinese traditional culture, a five-color system has been formed. Respectively, cyan, white, red, black, and yellow correspond to wood, metal, fire, water, and earth, and the five directions of the east, west, south, north, and middle. From the primitive clan society to the Great Qin Empire, ancient people favored black, believing that black is the color of the sky; White represents multiple meanings but it is often connected with mourning, death, and other sad things; Red represents auspicious festivities; Yellow, symbolizing the color of the earth, represents noble and was always used as the exclusive color for imperial power after the Han Dynasty; Therefore, the colors often used in traditional patterns are the classic Chinese red and imperial gold. The color selection reflects the unique national spirit of the Chinese nation<sup>[7]</sup>.

In modern clothing design, modern color matching and ancient classic colors can be combined to create innovative colors for traditional plant patterns. In terms of color matching, clothing designers now boldly use colors such as blue, gold, green, and red to reflect the characteristics of plants and the beauty of clothing, while earth, gray, white, silver, and black are used as matching colors, making the color matching of traditional plant patterns more eye-catching with extremely obvious contrastive characteristics. Although such kind of color matching is rarely used and accounts for a small proportion, it also adds unique characteristics to clothing.

### 4.3. Application of the beautiful shape of traditional plant patterns

The beauty of clothing is mainly reflected in the composition of color configurations, styles, reasonable use of materials, types, and so on<sup>[8]</sup>. Therefore, to express the aesthetic beauty of clothes, designers need to use patterns alternately and repeatedly, grasp the rhythm in terms of the shape and composition of clothing, and use different methods such as prominence, contrast, coordination, and balance to present the shape of clothing.

For example, abstract traditional plant patterns for clothing styling, because plants are common living elements in nature and are often used in decorative themes as an art. Then the introduction of decorative styling in clothing design will highlight the visual beauty of clothing. In the historical development and evolution process, traditional plant patterns themselves have unique shaping characteristics. Especially in modern clothing design, as the traditional symbolic limitations have been broken, traditional plant patterns have been presented through abstract shapes but not figurative forms of plants, strengthening its artistic beauty in clothing design. With highlighted characteristics through abstract modeling methods and simplified expression forms, the application of traditional plant patterns in clothing styling is simpler to better coordinate the design style of the patterns and modern clothing<sup>[9]</sup>.

For example, the rhythmical image of traditional plant patterns is applied to clothing styling, which refers to the strong sense of the order of the patterns — obvious image fluctuations with a certain regularity. The flexible and varied application of traditional plant patterns can bring a rhythmical image of the clothing through decoration. Even if traditional plant patterns are used for a local position of clothing, the changes in pattern styling are always the important thing to unify the overall style of clothing with the pattern style, so that the users and appreciators can feel the design details and rigorous and full visual sense, while the structural characteristics of clothing can also be strengthened.

## 5. Conclusion

With the development of society, in modern clothing design, the decorative functions of traditional plant patterns are more diversified, and the importance of clothing design is becoming increasingly prominent. Therefore, clothing designers must understand the development process of China's traditional plant patterns, realize their importance for clothing design, understand their morals in clothing design, and apply the beauty of morals, shapes, and colors to clothing design. Traditional plant patterns can not only increase the beauty of clothing but also strengthen the artistic sense of clothing, showing their cultural connotations. Additionally, based on inheriting China's traditional pattern culture, they can provide more design inspiration and design elements, expressing a sense of modernity and traditional culture at the same time, so that China's traditional plant pattern culture can be brought to the world.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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