

# Innovative Application of Guangdong Chaoyang Paper Cutting Elements in Cheongsam Design

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## Abstract

Cheongsam is usually made of brocade, satin, crepe, and silk. The patterns on the fabrics used are one of cheongsam design's most essential fashion features. Therefore, the idea is to integrate a national intangible cultural heritage of Chaoyang paper-cutting folk art into cheongsam design, so as to inject some blood of local traditional culture into cheongsam and endow it with a different charm. This study proposes integrating two art forms, i.e., paper-cutting elements and cheongsam, to create a unique cultural and fashion product. Chaoyang paper cutting elements have been innovatively extracted and embedded in cheongsam clothing design through reading and querying the relevant materials. A proposed innovative mode of extracting and integrating the paper cutting elements, dubbed adaptive integration and mutual feature integration, respectively, ensured the creation of an aesthetically pleasing fashion good involving two distinct cultural elements. Four primary pattern arrangements have been presented namely: border design, all over pattern I & II and central placement. This is the first time a study proposed the integration of two prominent art forms to create a unique cultural and fashion product.

**Keywords:** Qipao, Garment design, Chinese paper art, Traditional culture, Innovative design, Cultures

## Introduction

Cheongsam is a classic label of Chinese women's traditional clothing, with simple lines and exquisite patterns. "Qipao" (Mandarin) and "Cheongsam" (Cantonese) are used to describe the same Chinese dress worn by women. History shows that the qipao, a Chinese dress, dates back to the Han Dynasty (Gao, 2005; Sheng, 2010). Other history scholars have even argued that the cheongsam must have been influenced by the straight skirt worn during the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC - 771 BC) (Yuan & Fang, 2002). The modern qipao, nonetheless, is

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thought to have inherited its features from the chángpáo (long robes) worn by Manchu women during the Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1912); however, its evolution reflects aesthetic tastes and styles from diverse periods in history.

Its continuing development lasted centuries until the 1920s (Cheng, 2021). When it metamorphosed into the symbolic body-hugging apparel distinguished by a side slit and a high cylindrical collar seen today (Lin, 2022).

In April 1929, the national government designated the cheongsam as a national costume, and even though several Chinese cultural costumes exist, most, if not all, are not at par with the cheongsam in terms of global exposure, fashionability, and widespread cultural endorsement (Liu, 2018a).

At present, the application of paper-cut elements in clothing in China has gradually attracted the attention of many Chinese fashion designers. An exploratory study on the significance of applying paper-cut elements in tourism product design has also been cited (Liu & Wang, 2019).

Chaoyang paper cutting is one of the three treasures of Chaoyang folk art in Guangdong Province, and it is also a national intangible cultural heritage (Huiming, 2021). Chaoyang Paper Cutting refers to paper-cutting art in the Chaoshan enclave of Guangdong province, covering the four cities of Shantou, Chaozhou, Jieyang, and Shanwei. The rise of Chaoyang Paper Cutting is attributed to people from the central plains of China who moved to this area.

The cultural promotion aspect in studies about paper-cutting art in recent years has yet to attract much interest. Traditional arts and crafts industries worldwide are now focusing on both creativity and modernity, making every effort to ensure their craftwork can adapt to the needs of contemporary society (Hsu & Tsai, 2015). The contention is that, the ingenious combination of paper-cut art and modern design, not only enriches the design thinking, but also enlightens the concept and performance of modern design. As such, there is the need to illuminate the essence of traditional culture in these cultural art forms through innovative measures (Zhao, 2014).

The urgent task therefore is to make these art forms resonate with society, so as to attract more people to understand this folk art. Therefore, integrating Chaoyang paper-cut and cheongsam, a folk art that contains the central plains' regional culture and striving towards its innovative application is worth exploring and experimenting.

The object of this paper is thus to share the combined effect of the Chaoyang paper-cutting pattern on Cheongsam. This approach ensured that the integration of paper cut patterns into cheongsam complements each other to create a bright fashion card, which has a positive significance for the development and innovation of Chinese traditional clothing and folk art. This paper presents a design route and follows the design principles of Chaoyang paper cutting to analyze how to carry out innovative applications in cheongsam design.

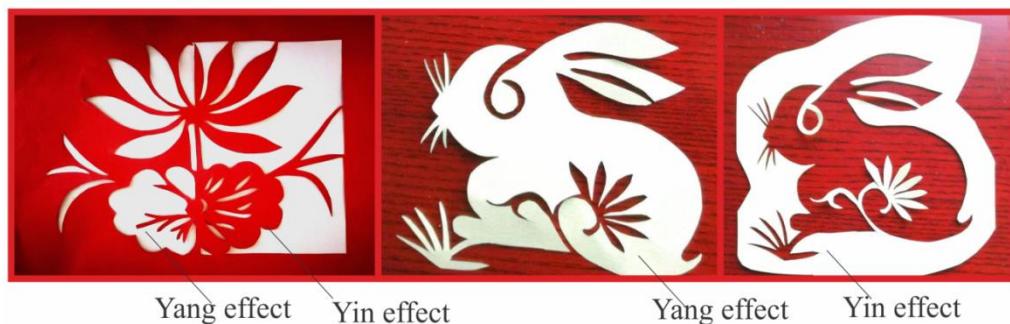
### **Chaoyang paper cutting element analysis**

The designation of paper-cut art varies from place to place. Paper-cutting art in China is broadly partitioned into northern and southern versions. The northern representatives are

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Shanxi Province paper cuttings, Shaanxi Province folk paper cuttings and Shandong Province folk paper cuttings. The southern regional representatives are Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu Provinces (Wang, 2013). Bold designs characterize Chinese northern paper-cutting art as opposed to the delicate lines of Southern styles. The other difference that exists is in the symbolism of the themes or motifs which are based on the local cultures of the people. Paper-cutting art in the northern part of China is usually referred to as “window flower” and “hinge flower” in Chaoshan. Chaoyang paper-cutting belongs to the southern group covering the four cities of Shantou, Chaozhou, Jieyang, and Shanwei in Guangdong province.

Generally, Chinese paper cut art has two main effects referred to as; the Yin (intaglio) and Yang (relief) effects or a mixture of both. Figure 1 shows the rendition of the yin and yang paper-cut effects. Yin paper-cuts are associated with the northern sector while the Yang is associated with the art form in the southern China. The yang cutting technique follows the traditional Chinese linear pattern tracing approach. Works done using such approaches are extraordinarily exquisite, with the lines cut as fine as hair. With regards to the yin technique, the images appear more solid and unaffected, with bright spots or white lines incised into the background surface. The combined cutting methods involving both yang cutting and yin cutting methods alternatively further enriches the paper-cut design effect.



**Figure 1** The *yin* and *yang* paper-cut effects

**Source:** Authors

In 1997, Chaoyang was named “the hometown of ethnic folk art (paper cutting) in Guangdong Province” by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Culture, and in 2006, Chaoyang paper cutting was listed in the first batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list (Wu, 2015). Although there is no exact documentary record on the history of the Chaoyang paper-cut, from the perspective of knife technique and work content, the Chaoyang paper-cut may have been brought and developed by immigrants from the Central Plains to Chaoshan during the “Yongjia rebellion” in the Eastern Jin Dynasty. For a long time, Chaoyang paper-cut has presented folk beauty with its delicate style, and described the life and customs of Yucheng with its auspicious patterns.

### Symbolism of Chaoyang paper cutting elements

As a folk art, paper cutting has a strong local feature. Many places in China are famous for their featured paper cutting (Jia, 2018). Chaoyang paper-cut belongs to the southern faction. Compared with the northern paper-cut, the Chaoyang paper-cut is exquisite, vivid, and beautiful. The patterns featured usually involve flowers, animals, figures, and landscapes, with strong local cultural characteristics. These auspicious patterns manifest traditional Chinese culture, reflecting people's yearning and pursuit for the better life.

**Table 1** Different paper cutting patterns and the symbolic implication of their elements

Pattern element	implied meaning	Basic meaning	Reason
bat	Good fortune		Use homophony to form figures of speech and express good wishes (the same below)
chicken	auspicious	Harmonic	
butterfly	good fortune		
Peacock, Phoenix	good luck and happiness to you		All are rare birds
Magpie	Happy events abound		Magpie can tell the time
tiger	Energetic	emblematic	The tiger is the king of all animals. It is powerful and brave
Liger	Eliminating diseases and avoiding disasters		Main patterns for baby clothes
Fish, frog	Pray for the continued prosperity of future generations		Fish and frogs are good at reproduction
Mandarin Duck	Men and women are united and grow old together	Analogic	<i>Mandarin ducks</i> (an affectionate couples) live together all their lives
Swallow, butterfly	Happy love, happy marriage		Swallows and butterflies both live and fly
Turtle and crane	A long life		Tortoise and crane have long life
Plant & Vegetables	Pine	Health and longevity	Classic Pines do not wither in cold

Pattern element	implied meaning	Basic meaning	Reason
Chinese cabbage	Wealth		
Lotus flower	Many offsprings	Harmonic	
Longan	reunion		
Peony	Wealth		Express the meaning of pattern elements according to their specific images
kumquat	auspicious	emblematic	
Articles	Bottle	Peace all year round	Harmonic

Table 1 presents different paper-cutting patterns and the symbolic implication of their elements. The main themes of Chaoyang Paper Cutting are auspiciousness, festival celebration, and people's daily life activities. Its composition is always symmetrical with strict structures. The paper cuts have different styles and techniques, but all are based on hope for good luck to usher in festivities. In addition to the good wishes expressed by individuals, different elements in the paper-cut are combined together and represent the simple blessings of the people in a harmonious way. Table 2 shows some different paper-cutting patterns and their implied meanings.

**Table 2** Different paper cutting patterns and their implied meanings

Composition	Implied meaning	Basic meaning
Jujube + peanut + longan + lotus seed	Wish to bring forth children	Social Harmony
Lotus + carp	Abundant fish year on year (continuous prosperity)	
Peach + five bats	Five blessings to celebrate one's birthday	
Three sheep	Auspicious beginning of a new year	
Magpie + plum blossom	Happiness shows in one's face	

Therefore, Chaoyang paper cutting has always played an essential role in the folk cultural activities in Chaoshan area. It not only carries forward the traditional culture of the Chaoshan people, but also conveys the humanistic spirit of local folk customs. It retains the simplicity of central plains culture and integrates the flexibility of southern coastal culture. The

paper-cut pattern elements can express various auspicious wishes using metonymy, symbol, etc. As shown in Table 1, different paper-cut pattern elements express good wishes.

### Chaoyang paper cutting designs

The earliest Chaoyang paper-cut work shown in Figure 2 is “the bat” which is said to have been created during the reign of Yongzheng during the *Qing* Dynasty. It has the most distinctive characteristics of Chaoyang paper-cut: It portrays a precise combination of Yin and Yang paper-cut effects with soft lines. Taking the bat image, which shows Yin paper-cut effect as the main body, the effect appears to illuminate the luster of bat wings; the lotus and banana leaves cut with the Yang effect are also used as decorations, which are vivid and beautiful.



(a) “The bat”



(b) “Prosperity”

**Figure 2** Classic Chaoyang paper-cutting artworks

**Source:** Authors

Xu Zunying, a provincial successor, created the word “prosperity,” shown in Figure 3. With the Belt and Road theme, it uses the ancient paper-cut art layout format – “*tuan hua*” and uses radial or rotating circles for pattern display. Based on depicting the main image in thick ink and heavy color, the whole work is well-organized and contrasts with reality and realism. The colorful flowers set off the myriad artistic conception and express the beautiful sustenance for the glorious future of the motherland.

### Current Trends in Classic paper cutting pattern elements in fashion

With the passing of time, paper cutting, a folk art, is gradually being recognized by the public and has been widely applied and practiced (Xiaowen, 2021). Nowadays, Chinese people can be seen dressed in paper-cut elements expressing the culture of paper-cut on various occasions (Li et al., 2011). Chinese traditional elements are recognized by the majority of the Chinese nation and shared by the Chinese nation, which condenses the spirit of Chinese traditional culture.

As shown in Figure 3(a), the Chinese women’s trampoline gymnastic team at the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games wore impressive cheongsam gymnastic clothes with Phoenix as the

motif for the paper-cut elements. The Phoenix is a popular motif used for embroidery printing design and other art forms.



(a) Qipao gymnastic suit



(b) Paper-cut designed jersey

**Figure 3** Qipao gymnastic suit and Gymnastics clothes with paper-cutting elements

**Source:** Network (2021)

This cheongsam expresses profound meaning like paper cut patterns: nirvana and rebirth, and the Phoenix dances for nine days. The traditional cheongsam collar, exquisite buckle, and diamond embellished Phoenix take-off pattern elements appear soft, exquisite, and legendary. Figure 3(b), shows that Chinese gymnast Tang Xijing also featured paper-cut elements in her competition outfit. The large peonies depicted on her chest, expressed rich and elegant warm-heartedness.

In a related development, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics carefully and skillfully integrated intangible cultural heritage into each Olympic symbol. The Olympic Games provided an excellent window to publicize traditional culture, and various innovative methods of paper-cutting elements were displayed.

### **Cheongsam design characteristics**

Every Qipao is tailored based on the customer's figure to provide optimum fit and to avoid any overly oversized garments (Guo, 2014). The cheongsam has undergone several years of metamorphosis and modification (Huang, 2017). Typically there exist three leading brands of cheongsam fits, namely the classic fit being the Shanghai-style fit, which possesses a similar silhouette to a conventional pencil-dress and can be highly figure-hugging. The other fits are the Beijing-style which looks more or less like an A-line dress, and the Hong Kong-style Cheongsam, which is on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Hong Kong. Cheongsam is usually made of brocade, satin, crepe and silk. Cheongsam fabric patterns feature themes from traditional Chinese symbols, geometric shapes to floral patterns (Liu, 2018b; Zhang, 2022).

There exist many more nuances relative to the parts of the qipao garment; however generally, six main parts can be outlined, namely, the collar (mandarin collar), pankou (buttons),

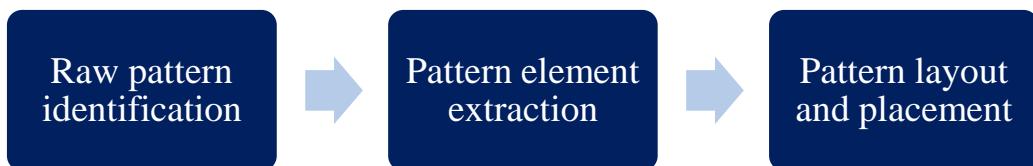
sleeves, large front, hems (edges) and side slits (Miranda, 2018). The mandarin collar can, and has historically been designed in various height ranges. The Pankou (Chinese frog closures / decorative toggles) refers to the traditional Chinese knotted buttons. It has been used as a fastener for qipao, extending from the bottom of the mandarin collar down to the front of the qipao along the right side of the garment.

The front part of the qipao is referred to as the large front or simply front. It essentially denotes the frontal closure area of the qipao, akin to the button-down area of a shirt. The hem usually features single-colored narrow edging made by stitching a narrow piece of material rolled or wrapped around the edge of the garment. Different sleeve designs are featured in the modern qipao. The most typical sleeve lengths on a qipao today are either sleeveless or fitted cap sleeves.

Qipaos have historically been popular in a range of lengths. Usually, a cheongsam has two long slits at either side of the hem for convenient movement and display of the legs. The backdated old-fashioned waist of the Qipao gradually changed from the previous loose to tight and narrow, and the stand collar gradually turned into a modern and stylish low collar; this makes people's necks slender (Nitish, 2020).

#### **Application of paper-cutting elements in innovative Cheongsam design**

As for integrating the two, it is necessary to carefully integrate the Chaoyang paper-cut elements innovatively into the cheongsam design rather than simply applying the original shape and content. This phenomenon has been described as adaptive integration (Shuaib & Enoch, 2014).



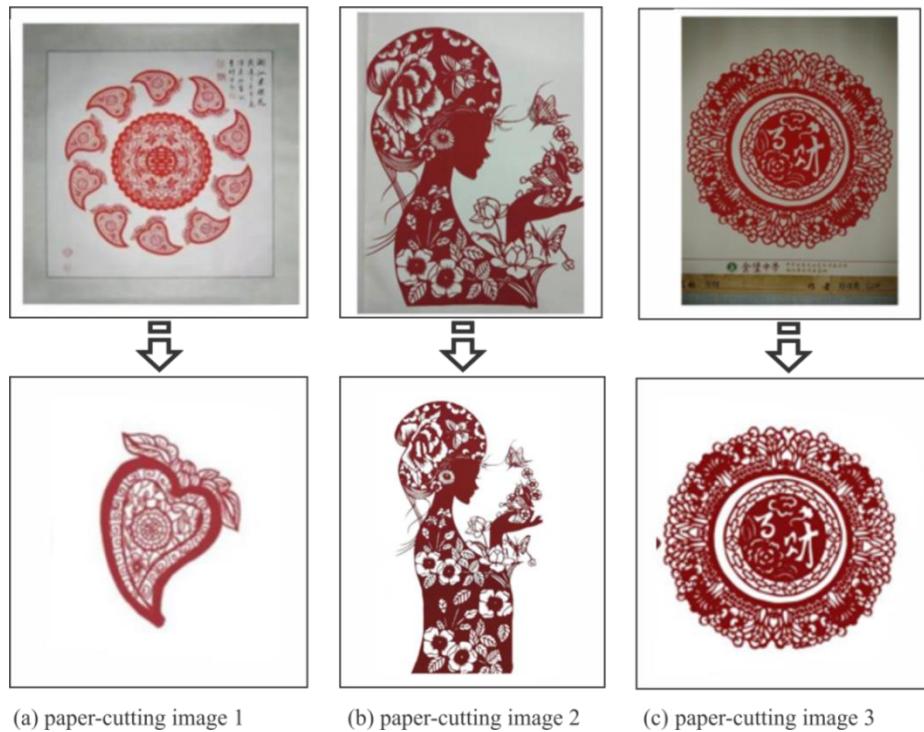
**Figure 4** Steps for pattern element application

**Source:** Authors

Adopting an adaptive approach is not to eliminate the original concept but rather to enhance it. The steps involved are illustrated in Figure 4. Therefore, in the innovative design, an original or raw paper-cut pattern needs to undergo deconstruction to extract different elements, then reorganized and the elements reprocessed before integration with the cheongsam to create a refreshing fashion spark, forming a highly consistent design style. As such the catchphrase is to let the Chaoyang paper cut develop in the cheongsam design and, in turn, let cheongsam innovate in Chaoyang paper cutting. It is worth mentioning that using different fabrics in cheongsam can also change the visual effect of art and design review of cheongsam. Therefore, different fabrics must be chosen according to the desired design effect, because cheongsam offers comprehensive options for selecting materials.

### Extraction of pattern elements and layout design

The beauty of cheongsam lies in its shape, fabric designs quality, and production technology (Ying, 2016). Good production technology can regenerate a cheongsam, and good patterns can bring a different charm as well.



**Figure 5** Extracting pattern elements from Chaoyang paper cutting images

**Source:** Authors

A Chaoyang paper-cut work should not only be used directly but its essence should be extracted. This kind of extraction cannot be just a simple mechanized splicing or listing but an organic combination of patterns based on understanding. As shown in Figure 5(a), “Chaoshan flower-shaped corn cakes” or “*Chaoshan miguo hua*” is the most representative work of Chaoshan food in Chaoyang paper cutting. In this work, the most distinctive pattern of the flower-shaped corn cake was extracted to prepare for the subsequent fashion design application.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 5(b), in addition to extracting the essence, it can also be extended in the original paper-cut works to enrich the paper-cut elements and adapt to the cheongsam. The traditional elements of the back Chaoyang paper cutting and cheongsam produce a consistent beauty, making the clothing both novel and unique, and there is no lack of classical charm.

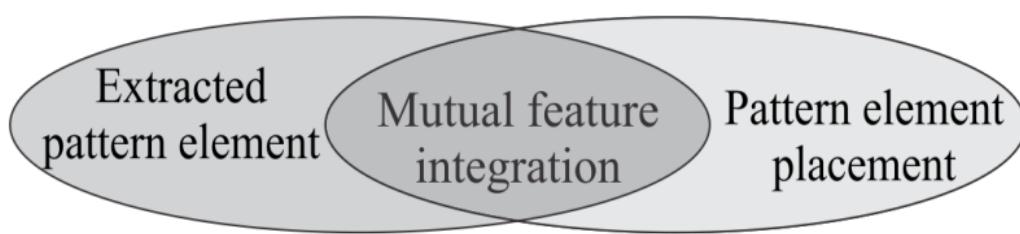
By mastering the essence of Chaoyang paper-cut, the authors designed some paper-cut works, such as the work in Figure 5(c), with Yang paper-cut effect as the main element, supplemented by *Yin* paper-cut effect, and cabbage as the main element, homonymous with

“Baicai” in mandarin, plus elements creating an auspicious meaning such as Jin Yuanbao (Gold ingot). Using “Baicai” and Peony, in addition to using the round flower technique to display patterns radially and rotationally from a central point to the surrounding areas, forms a pattern with complete meaning and structure. After the paper-cut works are done, the whole pattern elements are extracted for later design placement application in the center of the garment.

Chaoyang paper cutting is rich and endowed with various pattern elements, which can be applied as an all-over arrangement, on the edge or in the center of the garment. If it is a small Chaoyang paper-cut element, it can be designed on the whole cheongsam in a staggered way by using it as a whole, so that the cheongsam is clear and moving, simple and not empty.

When Chaoyang paper-cut elements occupy a large area in a Cheongsam design, emphasis is placed on line patterns and the edges. This ensures that the cheongsam can enhance the figure of the wearer and cover up the defects simultaneously. When adopting central placement, consumers are usually guided to see the focus of the cheongsam through exquisite patterns, giving consumers a strong visual impact through combination, arrangement, spiral, overlap, and other methods.

However, no matter which form is adopted, the principle of moderation should be followed to prevent messy or overly simplified visual effects. After determining the design layout, the innovative integration design of Chaoyang paper cutting elements and cheongsam was carried out.



**Figure 6** Mutual feature integration model

Source: Authors

#### ***Integration of Chaoyang paper cutting elements in cheongsam design***

Chinese traditional arts have unique artistic systems and aesthetic standards, but there are always countless links between various traditional arts. Therefore, in order to truly integrate the innovative design of Chaoyang paper cutting and cheongsam, the authors proposed a system of mutual integration, what is described as the “*you have me, and I have you*”

This mutual feature integration model is a creative way of infusing the paper-cutting design elements to obtain an exquisite product of art. This is achieved by considering the shape and size proportionately when integrating the elements in order to ensure that the cultural identity of the element is preserved.

*Edge/Border design application*

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The adoption of Chaoyang paper cutting on the edge of cheongsam can not only emphasize the characteristics of cheongsam, but also increase the sense of line and outline of the cheongsam. As shown in Figure 7(a), at the shoulder and left waist, leaves and textures are incorporated beneath the element background of the *miguo hua* (petal- shaped corn cake).

This rendition can also decorate the waist, enrich the blank feeling of the shoulders, improve the overall sense of line, and use visual illusion to make the waist slim, and the large shoulder skeleton can also be well decorated. At the same time, the asymmetric design jumps out of the routine and enlarges the details, making it more artistic.

This kind of edge design is suitable for hollowing out, but it is more complex compared to hollowing out. However, the hollowing-out selection appears in the shoulder and waist and is combined with the unified tone of the underlying fabric to create a faint dynamic sense. While walking, it can give people an unforgettable aftertaste, present a simple and elegant female style, add a fresh charm, and give full play to the unique fabric reconstruction art of hollowed- out fabric.

#### *All-over pattern application*

When the Chaoyang paper-cut element is applied to the cheongsam design, it can be categorized into small area and large area placements. However, too complex pattern elements must be avoided when designing to forestall cumbersome and stereotyped impressions. Thus the most representative single or a few elements should be extracted for direct use, full print use, or continuous and regular use. The design of Figure 7(b) is suitable to be realized by the printing process, which can more intuitively show the elements of paper cutting.

Using the most common printing process in clothing production, on the premise of selecting suitable fabrics and comfortable colours, the Chaoyang paper cutting elements are printed in the way of printing, arranged in irregular sizes, to produce exquisite patterned fabric, which not only embodies the flavour of regional traditional culture, but also have the subtle beauty of modern freshness.

In addition to the overall use of small-area paper-cut pattern elements, the overall use of large-area paper-cut pattern elements can also achieve good results. As shown in Figure 6(c), the female silhouette paper-cut pattern elements are directly and boldly used as a whole, and the cheongsam skirt is adorned with tassels. These tassel or macramé elements are also common in the Chaoyang paper-cut pattern.

With the use of the same elements, cheongsam and Chaoyang paper cutting deliver design unity. The design of high slits and the flexibility of the high and low matching style of the slit position can become a design element that attracts young women. The whole design is akin to cheongsam being the canvas and painting with Chaoyang paper cutting elements, turning cheongsam into a beautiful painting.



**Figure 7** Various Pattern placement schemes on cheongsam designs

**Source:** Authors

#### *Central design placement application*

The pattern is generally the focus in the central placement application of Chaoyang paper-cut pattern elements. Patterns can generally be located in important positions of the cheongsam when used in the center, such as the back, front (chest), abdomen, waist, etc. As shown in Figure 5(d), the element “Baicai” is placed in the middle of the chest, and the pattern adopts a radioactive shape to catch the eye at a glance. Symmetrical beauty is displayed incisively and vividly, while setting off the mellow and plump beauty.

When positioned in the center, the Chaoyang paper-cut pattern is suitable for delicate embroidery. Several ethnic groups in China, namely the Miao, Bai, and Dong, adopt paper-cutting design as the basis for their embroidery artworks (Melichson, 2011), a practice handed down from generation to generation. The paper-cut elements are embroidered on the cheongsam, which can retain the paper-cut elements and create a unique and layered texture with silk threads, which makes a proper addition to the innovative design of paper-cut elements in clothing.

Through the combination of embroidery technology and cheongsam, costume designers can make cheongsam not only have practical value and oriental charm, but also ornamental value and aesthetic value, so it is favoured by modern women. The contention is that adding Chaoyang paper-cut elements to cheongsam with embroidery is not only in line with the

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aesthetic pursuit of the contemporary public for fashion, but also can integrate local culture into modern, fashion and export traditional culture to the country.

After determining the Chaoyang paper-cut patterns and extracting the most refined elements, according to its layout design, the two are combined under the condition that the main motif together with its relevant elements remains unchanged.

## Conclusions

This study presented an innovative application of Chaoyang paper-cut elements in cheongsam design. Using self-designed and modified classical Chaoyang paper cutting elements as motif themes, four pattern arrangement schemes, namely border design; all-over design 1, all-over design application 2, and central design placement application, have been adopted to embed Chaoyang paper cutting elements in cheongsam design innovatively.

To realize the innovative application of Chaoyang paper-cut art in cheongsam design, there is the need to promote the deep integration of traditional elements and fashion elements, to realize the modern combination of traditional art and fashion.

This study not only helps in curing the problem of neglect of a traditional art form's culture but also promotes and revitalizes a historical heritage, authentic culture, traditions and peculiarities to the world at large.

It also expands the scope of themes for garment design and manufacture in the era where design innovation is critical to the good market performance of fashion goods. Design innovation entails bringing forth ideas that arouse human desirability, and carries technological feasibility and commercial viability.

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