

Kesi (Chinese Silk Tapestry Weaving) in Transition: Historical Evolution and Contemporary Design Integration

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Abstract:

This article examines the historical evolution and contemporary integration of Kesi (Chinese silk tapestry weaving). It traces the development of Kesi and highlights its cultural significance and technical advancement across successive Chinese dynasties. The study further explores how Kesi is incorporated into modern design, emphasizing its alignment with contemporary aesthetics and technologies. Through examples from fashion and cultural-creative products, it illustrates how Kesi adapts to current trends while preserving its traditional essence. Finally, the article discusses the challenges and opportunities of safeguarding this cultural heritage in the context of globalization and technological change, and advocates a balanced approach that integrates innovation with the continuity of tradition in Kesi practice.

Keywords:

Kesi, Chinese Traditional Art, Cultural Evolution, Integration With Modern Design, Globalization, Cultural Heritage Preservation

1. Introduction

Kesi, an exquisite art form originating in ancient China, is not only a treasure of silk culture but also a radiant symbol of national heritage. Since its inception, Kesi has been regarded as a paradigmatic expression of Eastern art, distinguished by its unique techniques and profound cultural connotations. Over the course of historical change, the craft has continuously evolved, bearing witness to transformations in Chinese society and the growth of its cultural traditions. Today, under the impact of globalization and modernization, Kesi faces renewed challenges as well as opportunities—particularly in its engagement with contemporary design, where it exhibits notable potential for innovation.

This article seeks to review the historical development and technical characteristics of Kesi, and to examine its distinctive position within Chinese culture as it has evolved across different periods. It also analyzes the ways in which Kesi is being applied in modern design, with particular attention to how the craft achieves

innovation and integration within contemporary design practice. Through comparative analysis, we aim to illuminate the possibilities of combining traditional Kesi with modern design and to identify new pathways that such integration may open for the future development of Kesi.

2. Traditional Kesi and Its Historical Evolution

2.1. From the Han Dynasty to the Northern and Southern Dynasties

During the Han and Wei periods, the Western Regions had already witnessed the early development of Kesi-related techniques, most notably the emergence of the warp-continuous, weft-discontinuous method (*tongjing duanwei*). Archaeological excavations at Shan pua in Hotan, Xinjiang, provide early evidence of this technique, particularly in the unearthed tapestry-wool textile Human-and-Horse Motif. The textile displays a pronounced West Asian stylistic character, suggesting links between the technique and mythological imagery and cultural traditions from the Mediterranean littoral, and indicating a transmission route from West Asia into the Western Regions.

Over time, this advanced weaving method was introduced into China's interior and reached a new level of development during the Tang dynasty. Tang artisans adopted the warp-continuous, weft-discontinuous structure to produce silk textiles, gradually shaping a distinctive and highly refined tradition of Kesi that continues to be preserved and valued today. The introduction and subsequent development of this technique not only enriched Chinese silk-weaving practices but also exemplified cultural exchange and integration. It demonstrates that intercultural contacts along the Silk Road were diverse and interactive, and that such exchanges exerted a profound influence on the formation and evolution of Chinese traditional arts. In this sense, Kesi is not only a masterpiece of ancient Chinese art but also a material witness to the history of East–West cultural exchange.

2.2. Tang to Song: Technical Maturation and Artistic Peak

Shang Gang [1] notes that “the earliest known Kesi works date to the Tang dynasty. They have largely been found in northwestern China and were most likely produced by local minority weavers; their motifs often appear distinctly ‘foreign,’ with faint yet recognizable traces of influence from Western tapestry-wool traditions....” A particularly important archaeological discovery is the geometric-patterned Kesi band excavated in 1973 from the joint burial of Zhang Xiong and his wife at Astana, Turpan, Xinjiang. This band not only demonstrates the technical sophistication of Tang Kesi, but is also the earliest extant Kesi artifact identified to date. The find is therefore of considerable significance for research on ancient Chinese textile arts and the history of intercultural exchange.

The excavation of this Kesi band suggests that, by the Tang dynasty at the latest, China had already mastered a highly developed Kesi technique. The Tang was a period of exceptional cultural prosperity, during which artistic and artisanal technologies reached remarkable levels. As a representative craft, Kesi—with its refined workmanship and distinctive aesthetic language—both reflects the cultural flourishing of the time and signals exchanges and integrations with other cultures along the Silk Road. Moreover, the discovery provides material evidence that the history of Chinese Kesi can be traced back to at least the Tang dynasty, offering valuable physical data for the study of ancient silk textiles and weaving technologies.

In the Tang dynasty, Kesi was used primarily in funerary and religious contexts. Its dissemination followed two major routes: one spread toward minority regions in the northwest, where it remained largely utilitarian; the other moved toward the Central Plains and the Jiangnan region, where mounted and display-oriented Kesi works began to emerge [2].

The Song dynasty marked a period of vigorous development for both the technique and artistry of Kesi. Kesi produced in Dingzhou, Hebei, was particularly esteemed, and production was most flourishing during the Xuanhe reign. From the Northern Song to the Southern Song, craftsmanship became increasingly refined, and Kesi was also produced as a form of recognized “local product” [3]. Across this broader Song-period transformation—especially during the Northern Song—Kesi reached a new level of achievement. One representative work is *The Ziluan and Magpie Album* (Ziluanque Pu). In its composition and color deployment, the piece features a distinctive layout: each section comprises five horizontal rows of flowers and birds, while continuous branches and leaves ingeniously connect different blossoms. Various bird species fly among the floral clusters, forming a vivid and harmonious natural scene. Set against a purple ground, the work employs blues, greens, whites, and yellows in varied tonalities to articulate linework and spatial layering, exemplifying the technical mastery and refined aesthetics of Northern Song Kesi.

Northern Song Kesi was innovative not only in artistic expression but also in practical application. Many works in this period were produced in larger bolt formats and used primarily for utilitarian purposes. This shift reflects the economic prosperity of the Northern Song and the public’s growing demand for, and appreciation of, high-quality everyday goods. These characteristics demonstrate the maturation of technique while also revealing contemporary cultural orientations and aesthetic preferences.

In the Southern Song, the production center of Kesi gradually shifted toward Jiangnan, and notable changes occurred in both style and technique. Kesi increasingly developed toward appreciation-oriented production, influenced by the rise of court painting and bird-and-flower painting. Artisans employed the warp-continuous, weft-discontinuous structure to weave Chinese calligraphy and painting, achieving a close fusion between pictorial imagery and silk textile—an approach that constituted a novel mode of creation within Chinese visual culture. As an exceptionally delicate and complex craft, woven paintings and calligraphy (Kesi as pictorial weaving) required rigorous technical standards. These demands not only showcased artisans’ virtuosity but also stimulated further technical advancement. During this process, foundational techniques such as Jie, guan, gou, and Qiang were established, while more complex methods were innovated and developed, including shenhe Qiang, long Duan Qiang, gouke, pingke, zimu Jing, among others. The refinement of these techniques expanded Kesi’s expressive repertoire and enabled even greater precision and vitality in detail.

One of the most renowned Southern Song Kesi artists was Zhu Kerou, a female artist. Her surviving masterpiece *Lotus Pond and Ducklings* (Liantang Ruya Tu) has been widely praised for its distinctive technique and meticulous detail, and is regarded as a treasure of Chinese art. The work depicts an early-summer Jiangnan waterscape: lotus leaves spread across the water surface; two ducks play among them; egrets and kingfishers punctuate floating duckweed; dragonflies hover in flight. White lotuses, red water lilies, and daylilies bloom amid shimmering ripples. Through vivid

depiction and artistic imagination, the scene is “fixed” in Kesi, representing a high point of Southern Song Kesi artistry.

From the Southern Song onward, Kesi production in China developed along two principal trajectories: utilitarian textiles and appreciation work. This bifurcation reflects changes in the social and cultural environment as well as differentiated demands for and valuations of Kesi. Utilitarian Kesi was used for everyday items such as garments, curtains, and bed hangings, with production emphasizing durability and function while still attending to decorative quality—demonstrating the craft’s integration into daily life. Appreciation-oriented Kesi, by contrast, prioritized artistic value and aesthetic expression, often depicting refined pictorial scenes such as landscapes, figures, and flowers-and-birds, and thus achieving high levels of artistic accomplishment. This development not only attests to technical sophistication but also reflects elite pursuits of beauty and art.

It is noteworthy that the early and middle Yuan periods constitute an exception in the history of Kesi. During this time, social instability and political change may have affected the craft, potentially resulting in temporary stagnation or regression in production and development. Over time, however, Kesi regained momentum and continued to occupy an important position within Chinese traditional culture and art. In particular, appreciation-oriented Kesi remains highly valued and has been continuously preserved and transmitted to the present day.

2.3. Yuan to Qing: Shifts in Patronage, Function, and Scale

In the early Yuan dynasty, the aristocracy showed a stronger preference for utilitarian textiles; consequently, Kesi temporarily shifted back toward a development trajectory centered on practical use. This tendency was likely shaped by the social environment of the time and the consumption needs of the elite. By the mid-Yuan period, both technical refinement and the appreciation value of Kesi appear to have declined, a change that may be attributable to a combination of political, economic, and cultural factors [4].

In the late Yuan, however, as Han cultural traditions re-emerged and exerted renewed influence, Kesi experienced a revival. Its style began to echo Song-period aesthetics, and a new vogue emerged—most notably the production of woven portraits of emperors and empresses. This development underscores the adaptability and variability of Kesi across different historical contexts.

During the Ming dynasty, economic expansion and the growth of handicraft industries reached a peak within the premodern social order, and Kesi techniques advanced markedly. Kesi production became more diversified and widespread: in addition to imperial garments, it was used for mounting calligraphy and painting and for creating woven renditions of celebrated artworks. Notable examples include Zhu Liangdong’s *Offering Longevity at the Jasper Pool* (Yachi Xianshou Tu) and a Kesi adaptation of Qiu Ying’s *Birds Singing by the Waterside Pavilion* (Shuige Mingqin Tu) [5]. In this period, major centers of Kesi production shifted toward the Beijing court and folk workshops in Suzhou.

The Qing dynasty represents a culminating phase in the development of Chinese arts and crafts. Kesi techniques continued to improve, and many large-format works were produced, such as *Li Bai at a Night Banquet in the Peach and Plum Garden*, *The Longevity Star*, and *Immortals Gathering on a Sacred Mountain*. Nevertheless, despite these achievements, Qing Kesi is often considered artistically inferior to the

Song-period apex. Song dynasty Kesi occupies a pivotal position in the history of the craft for its superb technique, subtle pictorial expression, and deep cultural resonance [6].

2.4. Republican-Era Decline and Contemporary Revival in Suzhou

Suzhou Kesi, often regarded as the principal and most influential center of Kesi production in China, has a long and rich history. After the craft was introduced to Suzhou during the Southern Song dynasty, Suzhou Kesi developed rapidly in the Ming and Qing periods and became a major hub for Kesi art. According to the Ming scholar Wang Ao in *Gazetteer of Gusu* (Gusu Zhi), folk Kesi in Suzhou was particularly renowned in the Lumu area outside Qimen. The Ming literatus Wang Qi likewise praised Kesi from Wuzhong (i.e., Suzhou) as exceptional.

During the Qing dynasty, many Suzhou farmers practiced Kesi as a sideline occupation, a tradition that continued into the Republican era, when Suzhou Kesi products were exported overseas [7]. During the War of Resistance, these products were sold mainly to Japan. After the war, however, the loss of major markets led to a nationwide decline in Kesi production.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Kesi entered a new phase of development. The artisan Shen Jinshui joined the "Embroidery Production Group of the Folk Arts Unit" under the Suzhou Federation of Literary and Art Circles, where he helped cultivate successors and laid an important foundation for the revitalization and transmission of Suzhou Kesi [8]. Among his most prominent protégés was Wang Jinshan. Wang successfully reproduced Southern Song Kesi works associated with Shen Zifan and, while inheriting traditional techniques, introduced innovations and further development, opening a new chapter for Suzhou Kesi. Through the establishment of studios, Wang and other practitioners have continued to train a new generation of Kesi artisans.

The revival and renewed prosperity of Suzhou Kesi reflect the cumulative efforts of multiple generations. In particular, replicas such as the Ming Wanli Emperor's Kesi dragon robe vividly demonstrate the exceptional craftsmanship of Kesi artisans. After more than two millennia of transformation, decline, and renewal, Kesi in contemporary China has successfully embarked on a new trajectory of development.

3. Kesi in Contemporary Design: Integration Pathways

3.1. Contemporary Explorations of Kesi

As traditional culture is brought into dialogue with a new era—particularly with regard to the transmission and development of Kesi—we face a landscape in which challenges and opportunities coexist. Historically, traditional Kesi production was largely organized through family-based workshops, and creative approaches tended to be relatively conservative and inward-looking. Yet driven by globalization and modern technologies, Kesi has begun to enter contemporary design fields in new forms and contexts.

On the one hand, Kesi practitioners and designers are working to integrate traditional techniques with modern design thinking. By drawing on the expressive vocabulary of Chinese ink-wash aesthetics (e.g., splash-ink effects) as well as visual strategies from Western painting and photography, Kesi has been infused with renewed vitality. This integration is evident not only in stylistic shifts—such as motif

simplification and innovations in color palettes—but also in materials and technical applications, for instance by combining traditional Kesi processes with modern textile technologies. On the other hand, current attention remains strongly focused on the collection, conservation, and safeguarding of historical Kesi artworks. Northern Song pieces such as *Zitianlu Kesi* and Zhu Kerou's *Lotus Pond and Ducklings* are widely regarded as national treasures, and their auction records reflect sustained recognition of Suzhou Kesi's cultural and artistic value [9].

Nevertheless, the inheritance and development of Kesi confront several critical constraints. First, there is a succession problem: because the craft is technically complex and extremely time-consuming, and because contemporary life operates at an accelerated pace, younger generations often show limited willingness to undertake long-term apprenticeship [10]. Second, there is a market problem: traditional Kesi products—given their pricing, materials, and conventional subject matter—can struggle to align with today's diversified and personalized consumer demands. Addressing these issues requires active exploration of new development pathways. Public communication and education should be strengthened to enhance awareness of Kesi's cultural value and to cultivate interest among younger audiences. At the same time, design and production methods need to be innovated so that Kesi can better resonate with contemporary aesthetics and market expectations. In addition, the integration of Kesi with modern technologies—such as digital exhibitions and online instruction—offers promising ways to expand its visibility and reach new audiences [11].

In sum, to sustain and advance Kesi is not only to continue cultural tradition but also to promote and renew vernacular arts. On the basis of preservation and safeguarding, the key to giving this ancient craft new life lies in developing thoughtful innovations that respect its core techniques and cultural meanings while enabling new applications and forms of value.

3.2. Integrating Kesi Art with Contemporary Innovation

In the process of integrating traditional art with modern design, Kesi encounters distinctive challenges as well as opportunities. On the one hand, it must preserve its craft integrity and cultural value amid the fast pace of contemporary life and rapidly shifting market demands; on the other hand, technological advancement and global cultural exchange create new conditions for innovation, dissemination, and wider public engagement [12].

The application of Kesi in contemporary fashion design demonstrates a compelling convergence of traditional craftsmanship and modern style. Designers draw on Kesi's distinctive texture and pictorial patterning to add a classical yet refined sensibility to modern garments. In some collections, Kesi functions as a medium for cultural-fashion hybridity: designers mine China's rich cultural repertoire and translate historical narratives into the language of contemporary fashion. Because Kesi involves multiple traditional procedures, its layered details also make visible the aesthetic and technical richness of heritage practice [13]. In certain runway presentations, moreover, the intersection of Eastern and Western artistic languages becomes apparent, revealing brands' interpretive engagement with both Eastern handcraft traditions and Western cultural references [14].

The integration of Kesi with cultural and creative products (*wenchuang*) has likewise emerged as an important direction of development. In seeking to reanimate

this ancient craft within contemporary aesthetics, designers have developed a range of innovative products that reflect both design creativity and cultural depth.

To support effective integration between traditional Kesi and modern design, a multi-pronged strategy is essential. Public education and exhibitions can enhance awareness and understanding of Kesi, while collaboration between artisans and designers can translate traditional techniques into forms that align with contemporary aesthetics and use contexts [15].

Kesi's incorporation and innovation in modern design is therefore not merely a fusion of technique and aesthetics; it is also an enactment of cultural inheritance and renewal. Such practices prompt renewed reflection on the value and meaning of tradition by granting Kesi—understood as a cultural signifier—new vitality that connects past and present, local and global. Its contemporary applications not only increase public visibility of traditional arts but also stimulate deeper interest in, and understanding of, Chinese cultural heritage.

The distinctiveness of Kesi reveals substantial potential within modern design. By combining traditional craft knowledge with contemporary design thinking, designers can create culturally resonant works that broaden Kesi application domains, generate new sources of inspiration for modern design practice, and facilitate more plural forms of cultural exchange.

4. Conclusions

Kesi, as a bridge between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary innovation, plays a vital role in negotiating continuity and change. Such integration not only enhances the cultural and artistic value of Kesi, but also demonstrates its adaptability and continued relevance in contemporary contexts. Confronted with challenges in skills transmission, constraints on design innovation, and difficulties in market promotion and public communication, attempts to combine Kesi with modern elements do not merely preserve its essence; they can also enrich and extend its meanings, opening new perspectives and application possibilities for traditional art.

This approach attests to both the enduring legacy and the evolving nature of traditional arts, offering valuable insights into sustainable and innovative pathways for cultural heritage in modern society. The modernization of Kesi concerns not only the convergence of technique and aesthetics, but also a broader process of cultural inheritance and creative renewal. It encourages renewed reflection on the value and significance of tradition and enables it to exert greater influence within contemporary life.

Through education, exhibitions, collaboration, and innovative design, Kesi can better respond to the needs of modern living while retaining its distinctive cultural qualities. This not only revitalizes Kesi itself, but also provides a reference model for the modernization of other traditional arts. The future of Kesi will likely unfold as a parallel process of inheritance and innovation: through continued exploration and experimentation, Kesi can acquire new vitality and flourish in an era shaped by globalization.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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