

Woven for the Few, Transmitted for the Many: The Institution-Craftsmanship-Aesthetics Triadic Structure and Organizational Transmission Pathways of Nanjing Yunjin Brocade

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Abstract: Nanjing Yunjin, inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, represents the pinnacle of Chinese silk weaving. Unlike ordinary folk textiles, Yunjin was produced exclusively for the imperial court across the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties — nearly six hundred years. Drawing on published workshop records from the Nanjing Yunjin Museum and the Nanjing Yunjin Research Institute, together with interviews with hereditary masters, this paper reveals the isomorphic structure of Yunjin from three dimensions: institution, craftsmanship, and aesthetics. The institution is the root — it provided sustained demand and resource support; craftsmanship is the branch — techniques such as cut-weft patterning, manual colour-insertion weaving, and pattern-coding were developed within this framework; aesthetics is the leaf — the dragon-phoenix-cloud motif system embodied imperial hierarchical norms. Three institutional barriers — legal prohibition, material monopoly, and cognitive deterrence — rendered Yunjin absolutely non-transgressable. The historical logic of “weaving for the few” made Yunjin's technical knowledge heavily dependent on individual artisans. After the late Qing collapse, the institutional “soil” that sustained this tradition was uprooted. This paper argues that contemporary transmission requires a shift from “individual-based” to “organisation-based” transmission, through systematic reconstruction across four dimensions: institution, education, community, and knowledge management.

Keywords: Nanjing Yunjin; intangible cultural heritage; institution-craftsmanship-aesthetics isomorphism; tacit knowledge; organisational transmission

1. Introduction

China was the first civilisation to domesticate wild silkworms and develop sericulture (Needham & Kuhn, 1988). Chinese silk technology followed a multilinear path — from plain weave to twill and satin, from warp-faced to weft-faced patterning, with specialised systems such as cut-weft tapestry and multi-ply gold-thread weaving (Zhao, 2005). Within the silk spectrum, jin (brocade) — a polychrome figured fabric — has always represented the pinnacle of achievement, forming the four great brocades: Shu, Song, Yunjin, and Zhuang. The Kangxi Dictionary defines jin as “gold, because its production is so laborious that it equals gold in value” (Kangxi Dictionary, 1716). Yet what makes brocade exceptional is not just its material value, but its institutional status. Other silks were affordable to aristocratic households; brocade symbolised the imperial house itself.

Nanjing Yunjin — with its most sophisticated craftsmanship, most precious materials, and most rigorously codified imperial motif system — is recognised as the “crown of brocades.” This crown was not won by technical superiority alone; it was the direct product of nearly six hundred years of imperial patronage. Its most famous category, zhuanghua (decorative weave), remains irreproducible by machine (UNESCO, 2009). This paper asks: How was Yunjin's “crown” status institutionally produced? When institutional patronage collapsed, can a craft tradition that has lost its “natural habitat” survive? Can it transform from “woven for the few” to “transmitted for the many”? This paper first reveals the isomorphic structure of Yunjin from three dimensions, then analyses the three institutional barriers, and finally proposes four dimensions of organizational transmission.

2. The Precondition of Isomorphism: How the Institution Produced Craftsmanship and Aesthetics

2.1 The Institutional Dimension: The State-Run System as “Growth Soil”

Yunjin's birth and development originated not from individual genius, but from persistent institutional demand. The institution's foundational role is evident in three respects.

Demand-pull. Without institutionalised imperial demand for gold-woven ceremonial robes, Yunjin would hardly have

existed. Rigid demand for textiles of specified grades on occasions such as court audiences, sacrifices, and major bestowals drove Yunjin's continuous production.

Standard-setting. Yunjin's colours and motifs were rigid markers of social hierarchy. Imperial yellow and five-clawed dragons were reserved exclusively for the emperor; the dragon-like (*mang*) motifs worn by ministers were strictly graded. This was not aesthetic choice but political order (Ming History; Qing History Draft).

Resource provision. Originating in the Eastern Wu period and formalised in the Eastern Jin "Douchang Brocade Bureau" (AD 417), the state-run weaving system persisted across dynasties (Zhao, 2005). The Northern Song Brocade Institute operated over four hundred looms. The Yuan imperial house favoured gold and absorbed Central Asian influences. The Ming dynasty created *zhuanghua*; by the Qing, the Jiangning Weaving Bureau elevated Yunjin to its historical zenith (Zhao, 2005).

The institution as root. Craftsmanship and aesthetics did not exist independently of the institution. Without institutional demand for "gold weaving," there would have been no sustained refinement of gold-thread production. Without institutional regulation of motif grades, Yunjin would not have developed its distinctive symbolic system.

2.2 The Craftsmanship Dimension: The Technological System Generated by Institutional Demand

Yunjin's craftsmanship encompasses raw material processing, pattern coding, weaving, and final inspection.

Raw materials. Silk thread is processed through distinct routes for warp, weft, and velvet. Pure gold thread undergoes eight steps: gold leaf beaten to approximately 0.1 microns. A single dragon robe could consume several thousand metres of round gold thread. Kingfisher-feather thread is used for dragon scales and phoenix feathers. Every stage embodies production without regard to cost — sustainable only within an institutional framework of "serving the few".

The weaving process. Weaving requires co-ordination of a draw-boy and a weaver. The draw-boy follows the pattern draft with a sequence repeated thousands of times daily. The weaver throws the shuttle in a fixed colour order. A single day's weaving yields only 5–6 centimetres.

Pattern-coding (*tiaohua jieben*). This translates a pattern design into lifting instructions for the loom — an ancient information-coding technique. A single complex pattern may involve tens of thousands of knotted cords, and coding can take months. This was the technical precondition for Yunjin's institutionalised production. However, this system is not entirely codifiable — the "feel" and "experience" of inheritors constitute tacit knowledge, making transmission highly dependent on individual masters.

2.3 The Aesthetic Dimension: The Visual Presentation of Institutional Norms

Yunjin's aesthetic system was a visual articulation of imperial authority.

Colour system. Yunjin's palette predominantly uses primary colours — bright red, imperial yellow, royal blue. This choice is linked to the ancient Five-Phases theory, in which yellow stands at the centre and is reserved for the emperor. In the Ming and Qing, Ming yellow was the exclusive colour of the emperor. The Qing subdivided yellow into four grades, with Ming yellow reserved for the imperial family. Ming regulations stipulated that the number of colours in a textile was proportional to official rank.

Motif repertoire. Yunjin motifs centre on dragons, phoenixes, clouds, and waves — symbols of imperial authority, celestial will, and dynastic stability. Folk motifs such as bats (fortune), deer (emolument), and fish (abundance) were also incorporated, but their placement and scale were strictly regulated. The core principle was absolute: five-clawed dragons for the emperor alone; four-clawed *mang* for princes and ministers (Da Ming Hui Dian).

"Weaving pictures." Yunjin is not weaving cloth but "weaving pictures" — using silk threads as pigments and the loom as canvas. Its aesthetic value lies not in being "beautiful" but in "conforming to ritual."

In sum, the three dimensions are isomorphic, but the order is clear — the institution is the root; craftsmanship and aesthetics are its products.

3. The Internal Mechanisms of the Institution: How Yunjin's "Crown" Status Was Systematically Produced

Yunjin's birth originated from the ruler's desire for absolute power differentiation. But how could a piece of cloth symbolise an empire for centuries? The answer lies in three institutional barriers.

3.1 The Production of Legitimacy: Drawing Absolute Forbidden Zones through Taboo

The principle that "one may not wear garments not befitting one's rank" was a rigid prohibition backed by severe penalties. The hierarchical regulations — five-clawed dragon for the emperor, four-clawed *mang* for princes — did not guide who could wear them, but declared who absolutely could not. Unauthorised use of Yunjin motifs was a capital offence (Ming

History; Qing History Draft).

3.2 The Production of Materiality: Creating an Unbridgeable Qualitative Divide through Closed-Loop Monopoly

Yunjin's production was an institutional cut-off of market logic. A single dragon robe required thousands of metres of gold thread from state treasury gold; kingfisher-feather thread hand-twisted from tribute peacocks; weaving speed only 5–6 centimetres a day. The fundamental premise was “absolute unavailability to the common people.” The entire supply chain was institutionally intercepted — gold leaf did not enter the market, artisans' registrations were locked within state institutions.

3.3 The Production of Knowledge: Achieving Cognitive Submission through Severe Sanctions for Mis-decoding

The motif system constituted a closed body of knowledge. The tiaohua jieben process was material coding; interpretation required social knowledge — distinguishing five claws from four, primary from secondary colours. But the system's power lay in matching this knowledge with severe punishment. “Misidentifying a dragon motif” or “misusing a mang motif” could trigger charges of usurpation.

3.4 The Result: Non-usurpable, Hence Eternal

Through the superposition of three barriers — legal sanction, closed-loop monopoly, and cognitive deterrence — Yunjin's status was cast into an impregnable fortress. When imitation became impossible on every dimension, Yunjin's supreme status no longer depended on aesthetic preference — it had become a logical necessity.

4. From Institutional Existence to Organizational Transmission

4.1 The Ontological Predicament of Transmission

Yunjin's meaning was conferred by imperial institutions. It never existed as an independent craft object but as a material component of state ritual. It had no basis in folk life, no commodity exchange logic. When the imperial system collapsed, Yunjin lost its production organisation, stable funding, and functional justification. It was transformed from “functional existence” to “existence for viewing.” Contemporary transmission faces a paradox: restoring “original appearance” would require restoring an institution incompatible with modern society; preserving only techniques transmits a specimen, not a living tradition.

4.2 Individual-Based vs. Organisation-Based Transmission

Yunjin's transmission was historically individual-based: masters taught apprentices through face-to-face instruction; continuity depended on individual life spans. After the Jiangning Weaving Bureau was abolished, the craft survived through a handful of elderly masters. Each lost master means permanent loss of unrecoverable knowledge. The task is to build an institutional mechanism that produces inheritors as a continuing function, not to find more individuals.

4.3 Four Dimensions of Organizational Transmission

Institutional dimension. Establish statutory status as “national craft-civilisation heritage” with dedicated state funding. Redefine the Nanjing Yunjin Research Institute as a preservation institution.

Educational dimension. Embed Yunjin knowledge into school curricula and university programmes. Establish degree pathways and apprenticeship programmes with formal certification. Develop teaching materials documenting tacit knowledge.

Community dimension. Build a formalised core craft transmission team bringing together inheritors from all processes. Establish regular technical exchange sessions and emergency recording mechanisms for elderly inheritors. Expand through public demonstrations and open workshops.

Knowledge management dimension. Systematically document tacit knowledge through multi-modal video recording. Digitise surviving pattern books. Construct a motif gene bank. Establish tiered craft standards — heritage-grade, study-grade, cultural-creative-grade — to separate preservation from commercial development.

4.4 From Closed Knowledge to Public Heritage

Historically, Yunjin's knowledge was closed — ordinary people were not even qualified to know of its existence. Contemporary transmission requires opening this knowledge through three channels: exhibitions shifting from aesthetic display to civilisational interpretation; academic research disseminated through accessible formats; and digital platforms allowing

public access without physical proximity to Nanjing.

5. Conclusion

Yunjin's transmission problem is meaning reconstruction, not craft preservation. The key is rebuilding the institutional mechanism of knowledge production. Yunjin's legitimacy lies in preserving a complete civilisational experience — how a society, through institutionalised means and centuries of effort, pursued the ultimate refinement of a craft. “Woven for the few, transmitted for the many” means: historically for the few; today, its knowledge and memory opened to the many — not through possession, but through understanding.

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