



LIVING HERITAGE



Hong Guizhen, an inheritor of *hangluo* craftsmanship, shows students the weaving technique.



Shao Guofei, daughter of Hong Guizhen, carries on her family's traditional craft of *hangluo* weaving.



Zhou Shuangxi, a national-level inheritor of *yunjin* craftsmanship.



Before weaving, artisans transcribe and amplify the patterns to be woven onto a piece of grid paper.



The production of *yunjin* uses refined raw material including silk and gold foiled threads.



During production, weavers pass a shuttle over and under the alternating warps. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



The China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, hosts a costume festival in April.



Clothes made of *hangluo* gauze, one of the most sought-after silk fabrics in the country.



Replica of a traditional landscape painting using *yunjin* technique.



The Nanjing Yunjin Research Institute develops a series of merchandise such as framed *yunjin* fabric pieces.



A brocade piece featuring auspicious patterns shown at the Nanjing Yunjin Museum. JIAN HUA / FOR CHINA DAILY



The butterfly brooch is one of the most popular merchandise at the Nanjing Yunjin Museum.

The sun, the sun, like a golden shuttle; the moon, the moon, like a silver shuttle. They are handed to you and also to me, to see who weaves the most beautiful life," goes a popular song from the last century named *The Golden and Silver Shuttles*.

It was common back then, but relatively rarely seen now, to use the loom shuttle to metaphorically describe the passage of time; and through numerous small workshops and skillful hands, the resources bestowed by nature were transformed into useful and exquisite items for daily life.

The production of silk involves the cultivation of mulberry trees and the breeding and care of silkworms, which produce cocoons from which silk filaments are unwound. It is one of the things that, even today, remains firmly archaic — continuing to exist in a time when patience was not a scarce resource.

People have been weaving silk, which is known as *si* in Chinese, into fabric for more than 5,000 years.

Once upon a time, when spring transitioned into summer, the Grand Canal, a vast waterway system connecting Beijing and Hangzhou in today's Zhejiang province, presented a bustling scene. Countless boats traversed the waterway, transporting exquisite fabrics. This precious cargo would take two months to reach the capital city, where they would be transformed into cool and lightweight robes, and worn as the favored attire of officials and nobility.

Silk has also played a significant role in Chinese interactions with the rest of the world. The Silk Road, a network of trade routes connecting the East with the West, was established during the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) and facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural practices. Chinese silk was one of the main goods traded, traveling as far as Rome and becoming a symbol of wealth and status in many cultures along the route.

"Silk has a particularly profound historical background and cultural accumulation, and is an important symbol of

Chinese civilization. It has been an important carrier of Chinese culture since ancient times, and remains so today," says Wang Hairong, director of the China Silk Dijin Limited Company, a subsidiary corporation of the China Silk Corporation.

"Silk combines the beauty of art and technology," she says.

The sericulture and silk craftsmanship of China was listed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2009.

In the 5,000-year-old silk culture of China, fabrics such as *ling*, *luo*, *zhou*, and *duan* represent the evolving techniques of textile production throughout different periods. Originating from silkworms and refined through looms, the varying weaving methods ultimately result in differences in shape and tactility.

The *luo* weaving technique stands out, particularly for the demanding level of craftsmanship.

Characterized by its openwork patterns, *luo* fabrics offer enhanced breathability. The technique originated sometime during the Spring and Autumn (770-476 BC) or Warring States (475-221 BC) periods, and gained popularity during the Song Dynasty (960-1279), mostly due to the attire required for official rituals and the impressive plain-woven silk textiles produced in Hangzhou, which are called *hangluo*.

Threads of the past

The value of *hangluo* is derived from two main aspects. First, its exceptional raw materials. The climate in the region is mild, making it an ideal place for mulberry cultivation. Second, the technique is incredibly refined.

Mulberry silk nourished by the soil and water of the Qiantang area has to go through a series of steps — including soaking, reeling, warping, threading the heddles and reeds, waxing, and shaking the warp — before it can be woven on the machine. The rough fabric then undergoes a fine-tuning process and dyeing to become the exquisite *hangluo* gauze.

During the golden era of the *hangluo*-making industry, there were at least thousands of

Editor's note:
There are 43 items inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage lists that not only bear witness to the past glories of Chinese civilization, but also continue to shine today. China Daily looks at the protection and inheritance of some of these cultural legacies. In this installment, we admire a much-coveted textile that threaded its way to every corner of the globe.

The FABRIC of CHINESE CULTURE

Silk has always been interwoven with the nation's history, and the textiles that employ the fine material remain sought after the world over — arguably, none more so than *hangluo* gauze, **Xu Haoyu** reports.

households involved in the entire production chain, running related businesses from sericulture to dyeing workshops, especially around the Genshanmen area in Hangzhou.

As time passed, the loom used to produce *hangluo* underwent several transformations, yet the production process still requires a large amount of meticulous hand craftsmanship.

In an era of mechanical production, inheriting a traditional craft is not easy, says Zhang Chungang, 44, head of the Hangluo Conservation Organization.

Before weaving *hangluo* on the loom, there is almost a monthlong process of organizing the warp and weft threads.

"Similar to the practices of the Song Dynasty, we soak the silk in clear water and add a secret ancestral formula. It takes 25 to



Top: The Nanjing Yunjin Research Institute adopts *yunjin* technique in replicating cultural relics, including a garment that belonged to an empress from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). **Above:** Scarves and clothes made of *hangluo* gauze, a type of silk fabric produced in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



28 days for the silk to be ready, and only then can we weave the fabric, resulting in a lightweight, cool, and comfortable gauze," explains Zhang.

Craftsmen must often immerse their hands in water, even in the cold winter, resulting in chapped and cracked skin on their hands. Most people cannot endure such discomfort, and many potential silk makers quit.

Due to the complexity of the process, the weaving technique of *hangluo* was almost lost. Yet, inheritors like Zhang and his parents-in-law, Shao Guanzhen and Hong Guizhen, are striving to keep the craft alive.

In the 1980s, Shao and his wife, Hong, the fourth-generation representative inheritors of *hangluo* craftsmanship, managed to restore and improve the manual



Operating the traditional wooden loom requires the collaboration of two artisans.

(1271-1911), the brocade weaving techniques reached their pinnacle.

The influence of the craft on Nanjing is evident. Many places in the city are named after silk manufacturing processes, and in China's literary classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*, written by Nanjing-born novelist Cao Xueqin, *yunjin* garments are frequently mentioned.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country continued to place special emphasis on preserving and passing down the brocade weaving technique, establishing the Nanjing Yunjin Research Institute in 1957.

Earlier this century, the institute set up the Nanjing Yunjin Museum, as the only professional museum in China dedicated to the display of the brocade, including its history, weaving technique, culture and contemporary artworks.

And now, with the support of technology and research conducted by the institute, *yunjin* craftsmanship and teaching are increasingly efficient and effective. In 2009, the craftsmanship of Nanjing *yunjin* brocade was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Chen Cheng, a young artisan at the institute, introduces the three primary applications of the fabric in ancient times — royal attire, particularly the dragon robes worn by emperors; decoration, adorning walls and chairs at palaces; as well as at religious and ceremonial settings.

Its esteemed status and unique historical

loom technique through persistent practice. Originally, it took a skilled craftsman eight hours to hand-weave approximately 80 centimeters to 1 meter of gauze. After the family's improvement, around 8 meters can be woven in the same amount of time.

Shao, who was born in 1954 into a family of craftsmen in Hangzhou, grew up in a weaving workshop. Since his grandfather learned the weaving technique at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the family has been practicing the craft for over 150 years.

The technique is considered "a means of subsistence, which cannot be stolen, cannot be burned, and will always keep us from starvation," Shao says.

His early memories were filled with scenes of nearly every household in the Genshanmen area producing *hangluo*. His father would pull a cart filled with the fabric to the nearby canal dock to sell it. With the money he'd receive, he would buy some oil, salt, rice, meat, and other groceries.

Shao loved following his father to sell *hangluo*, which allowed him to visit the city center and witness the bustling silk trade at the canal dock. His father would usually buy him a few candies, which were incredibly precious in an era of material scarcity.

This childhood memory, filled with warmth related to *hangluo*, encouraged him to collect and preserve the remaining eight traditional wooden looms from that time. In 1984, he expanded his family's small workshop into the Fuxing Silk Factory.

Shuttling to the future

Zhang, originally from Beijing, used to study finance as his major and had never come into contact with *hangluo* before moving to Hangzhou.

The first time he stepped into Shao's weaving factory, he found it quite hard to adapt to its harsh realities. The factory environment, due to the demands of *hangluo* weaving, was dark, damp, and had a particular smell.

He found it hard to believe that such a delicate and ethereal fabric was produced in such an environment.

Later, when he heard Shao mentioning

that running a *hangluo* business wasn't profitable and sometimes even ran at a loss, he suggested halting its production and switching to other more economically viable silk trades.

At that time, Shao didn't comment on Zhang's suggestion but proposed that he make him a set of *hangluo* clothes, which completely blew Zhang's mind.

"The outfit was light but extremely breathable. I couldn't help but marvel at the existence of such an extraordinary fabric," Zhang recalls.

He never mentioned closing down the factory again. Instead, he followed Shao to the factory every day, humbly learning the various production processes of the gauze.

Over the past few years, Zhang has been dedicated to the protection and inheritance of *hangluo* weaving technique.

"We have built a special loom that enables *hangluo* to be introduced into schools. Children can get hands-on experience with weaving. This approach significantly strengthens their understanding of the technique in a more intuitive way."

Continuous innovation, including enriching the colors of the fabric, has been effective in helping to evolve *hangluo* in recent times.

Zhang says: "Switching from the original monochrome to a variety of color styles, *hangluo* has broadened its appeal. Recently, we have also been trying new things in terms of improvements to the technique. We hope to adapt to the different functional requirements for modern clothing, such as sun protection and wrinkle resistance, by changing the structure of the fibers."

What's more, in order to change the impression that *hangluo* is a luxury beyond the reach for many, Zhang plans to introduce it into ordinary households through brand building, communication and product development.

"We will cooperate with companies from different fields and use modern media communication methods to enable everyone to see the charm of *hangluo*," Zhang says.

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Weaving its magic

By CHENG YUEZHU
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Among China's myriad forms of silk products, one of them — *yunjin* — remained shrouded in mystery for more than a millennium. Historically reserved exclusively for imperial use, its intricate techniques were passed down from generation to generation within the family lineages of select artisans.

Ancient Chinese granted it a name befitting its sublime nature, *yun* meaning clouds and *jin* meaning brocade. Just like clouds in the sky, the fabric has an iridescent sheen owing to its unique weaving technique and refined raw material.

With the dedication of generations of artisans, who sit at the gigantic weaving looms for hours on end, their fingers dancing among the intricate threads, the craftsmanship of *yunjin* brocade has been preserved, so that today, its beauty can still be appreciated in all its splendor.

Zhou Shuangxi, a national-level inheritor of the *yunjin* brocade weaving technique, is one of them.

Having devoted the past five decades to *yunjin* production, he has honed his expertise to the point where he can both replicate the antique imperial dragon robes in all their minutiae, and also skillfully represent other

art forms such as replicating the painting *Mona Lisa*.

However, Zhou recalls that before he entered the Nanjing Yunjin Research Institute in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, he had no idea what *yunjin* even was. Back in 1973, he graduated from a mining school, and was selected to become an apprentice of the craft at the institute, probably because it looked like he was "in good shape".

Zhou, along with around five other apprentices, faced a bleak picture at that time, with only several masters in their 70s and not even a loom at their disposal.

"The old masters eventually remembered that there was a loom stored away somewhere. When we opened the storehouse door, what I saw seemed like a pile of firewood. We assembled it into a loom 3 to 4 meters tall, and I finally saw for the first time what a traditional *yunjin* loom looked like," Zhou recalls.

The teachers were masters of the craft, and they taught the apprentices the traditional methods, from handling the fragile threads to using mnemonic rhymes to help them acquire the technique.

"It was difficult, but in a different way from mining. Mining requires heavy physical labor, but working with the soft and thin silk requires patience. My hands were

calloused from mining, so I used to soak my hands in warm water whenever I could, so that they could become softer and make it easier to reel the silk," he says.

Out of the six or so apprentices, Zhou is the only one who has persevered in the trade until this day. He participated in 1983 in the replication of an antique dragon robe unearthed from the Dingling Mausoleum in Beijing, and since then has continued to work on significant projects to replicate cultural relics.

"I am lucky to be in such a good era. All of my teachers were top-notch craftsmen and I was granted governmental funding to learn the technique. I now have the honor of being a representative inheritor," Zhou says.

Craft center

The origin of *yunjin* can be traced to the late Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420), when general Liu Yu defeated the Later Qin kingdom and brought the kingdom's craftsmen from Chang'an (the present day Xi'an in Shaanxi province) to the then capital Nanjing. The majority of these craftsmen were brocade artisans.

In 417, a governmental institution specially administering brocade production was set up in Nanjing, marking the advent of Nanjing *yunjin* brocade.

Nanjing is believed to be especially conducive for silk manufacturing, as it is commonly said that the water of the city's Qinhuai River is rich in tannic acid, a substance that facilitates the process of dyeing.

In the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties

role are key factors that set this silk production technique apart from others, according to Chen.

"China's silk craftsmanship has continuously evolved and progressed with the times, and within its vast history, *yunjin* represents a milestone where the technique reached a level of maturity," he says.

He draws an analogy between the *yunjin* manufacturing process and binary coding. After transcribing and amplifying the patterns onto a piece of grid paper, the artisans then arrange the warps and wefts, so as to create a draft of the textile to be woven.

As for the following weaving process, operating the gigantic wooden loom requires the collaboration of two artisans, one sitting at the top pulling the strings and informing the weavers of the patterns, and the weaver passing a shuttle over and under the alternating warps.

While the pattern designs usually symbolize goodwill and blessings, such as dragons, clouds and peonies, the weavers can freely change the colors of the patterns according to their tastes and judgment.

Contemporary appeal

Because of the intricacies of the weaving procedure and the delicacy of the raw material, including gold and silver foiled threads, the weaving process still cannot be fully replaced by machines. For a day of eight hours, two artisans can only weave 5 to 6 centimeters, hence the saying "an inch of brocade is worth an inch of gold".

For such a luxurious material, it is a marvel that its artisanal production technique has been preserved, but the institute goes even further with the vision to bridge the gap between traditional and the modern and introduce it into contemporary lifestyle.

"A concept our institute always upholds is 'to make art more lively and life more artistic,'" says Sun Yugang, director of the institute's product design department.

"It involves developing artistic works or functional products that are suited to the modern lifestyle, so that the general public today has access to, and can appreciate, the centuries-old craftsmanship that was once exclusively for royalty."

The institute has been working on developing innovative merchandise that captures the essence of the material and yet brings the technique closer to the modern lifestyle, from the high-end couture and *hanfu* (traditional Chinese attire), to memorabilia popular among the museum's visitors, such as brooches and scarves.

"Our creative products are an authentic embodiment of the time-honored tradition of *yunjin* craftsmanship. They are history that can be touched and appreciated, with genuine heritage woven into the very fibers," Sun says.



Online
Watch the video by scanning the code.