

# **LACQUER AS A SKIN: CONTEMPORARY CHINESE TEXTILE ART**

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## **Abstract**

This practice-based research evaluates the role of traditional lacquer culture in Chinese contemporary textile art, foregrounding the redefinition and reinvigoration of lacquer's cultural and artistic value. Drawing upon Jules David Prown's theory of material culture, this research seeks to offer a novel interpretation of lacquer as both skin and cloth, shedding light on its significance in contemporary artistic practices. This practice-based research further evaluates the relations of traditional Chinese lacquer methods and contemporary textile art, proposing a novel approach that unites historical craftsmanship with conceptual textile art. Key questions guiding this research are: How does the application of traditional lacquer art to contemporary textile art in China redefine the contemporary lacquer language through the concept of lacquer as cloth/skin? Additionally, can a new Asian understanding of lacquer as a skin/cloth be constructed by illuminating Jules David Prown's theory of material culture?

According to Professor Lishan Jin (2020), in China, lacquer is often referred to as an 'earliest cloth', signifying the initial skin of an object, and enjoys extensive use, particularly in mahogany furniture. China is the birthplace of lacquer art. However, lacquer, as a traditional Chinese craft, appears somewhat unfamiliar to contemporary youth, becoming a largely forsaken tradition and a waning craft eclipsed by contemporary art. Contemporary lacquerware remains significantly affected by the traditional art of lacquer, with its material constraints and conservative function and form. This practice-based research will advocate for a redefinition of the language of traditional lacquer by utilising the characteristics of cultural specificity, applying lacquer to contemporary Chinese textile art. This innovative practice of combining lacquer and Chinese contemporary textile art will explore conceptual artistic thinking unbounded by established tradition. The study seeks to combine lacquer with contemporary textile art, exploring the self-representation of 'who I am' when lacquer acts as the first layer of skin on an object, and how lacquer, when representing the second layer of skin, represents 'who I want to be'.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction: The Research Project

## 1.1 Introduction

Lacquer art made its first appearance in China 8,000 years ago during the Neolithic period (approx. 6000 BCE). This practice-based research will reposition traditional lacquer language by applying cultural specificity characteristics using lacquer to contemporary Chinese textile art. By utilizing Jules David Prown's theory of material culture as a tool, the research understands lacquer's culture and aesthetic meanings as applied to contemporary Chinese art. It also contributes to a deeper understanding of Prown's notion of inherent and attached value to redefine the traditional lacquer language in a contemporary context by reviewing the lacquer as representing Chinese culture and identity. This research will also explore the relationship between lacquer and textile, skin and cloth, as well as the correlation of tradition and contemporary.

In order to establish the context for the research and the methods used, this chapter provides the framework of the overarching project, the methodology and delimitations of the research, together with my experience as a textile designer. This chapter also outlines the aims and objectives of the research, as well as the research questions. It concludes with an outline of the focus and a concise overview of each chapter of the thesis.

This research positions the cultural value and technology of lacquer art as a tool for Chinese contemporary textile art and reviews the current adoption of lacquer technology in textile art and in emerging textile research from the perspectives of cultural heritage and new lacquer language. It shows a body of new work by the researcher, which supports illustrating this theoretical enquiry. 'Lacquer as a

skin/cloth' is the concept of the practice, trying to illustrate the different expressions of lacquer as the first skin and the second skin of the clothing that covers the skin. In this practice, a series of conceptual clothing will be presented.

Jules David Prown is an American Art historian educator and the recipient of the George Washington Kidder Award in 1986. In his theory of material culture, he mentioned that "the most apparent cultural belief associated with material objects relates to values" (Prown, 1982:3). Inherent value and attached value are major elements in Prown's theories of material culture (Prown, 1982). This thesis will shed new light on Prown's theory of material culture manipulated for artistic reasons in a cultural heritage context through the specific consideration of lacquer and textile.

Material culture includes what archaeologists typically refer to as artefacts, collectors as relics, and art historians as art objects. Artefacts include such objects as stone tools, potsherds, bottles, beads, buttons, fibulae, coins, clay pipes, paintings, and textiles. The thesis advances a new understanding of Prown's material culture theory by re-evaluating the traditional lacquer culture. It also aims to propose a new definition of the inherent aspects of tradition and accompanied value of Chinese lacquer. This is accomplished and derived through several analytical approaches as well as through practical experiments. Based on continuing the inherent value of the lacquer culture and endowing the contemporary lacquer culture with the attached value of lacquer as skin through the application of practice to textile research.

Simultaneously, the two collections (collection1: PALINGENESIS and collection 2: THE TAIL END OF TIME described in Chapter 5) of the practice show a series of new artefacts in the field of conceptual clothing. These two collections help to explore new perspectives and expressions, revealing how cultural transmissions influence Chinese contemporary textile art through the concept of lacquer as skin/cloth. The

combination of traditional lacquer language and contemporary textile art demonstrates lacquer art's attached value to support this theoretical enquiry's illustration. Lacquer as a skin/cloth is the central concept of the practice. Beyond that, my practice illustrates the different expressions of lacquer as the first skin (the intrinsic value of lacquer) and the second skin of the clothing (the attached value of lacquer) that covers the skin.

In addition, this research leads to the reinvigoration of textile technologies and traditions, instils new design aesthetics, and increases the traditional cultural value of lacquer by enhancing its meanings and relationships with textile art. Meanwhile, based on the disappearance of Chinese lacquer yarn technology and Rhino Skin (also known as Xipi lacquer) Lacquerware, this practice will combine these two lacquer technologies to explore new perspectives and reveal how cultural transmission influences Chinese contemporary textile art through the concept of lacquer as skin/cloth.

## **1.2 Research Question, Aims and Objectives**

### **Research Questions**

A review of the literature and existing studies on applying lacquer to contemporary textile art has revealed little research on the topic. The relationship between Chinese textile art and lacquer art has not yet been elucidated, it identified that gap in this research on the concept of lacquer as a skin/cloth in the textile art effect with a material culture focus (discussed in detail in Chapter 2). Therefore, this research will address two key questions:

- How does the application of traditional lacquer art to contemporary textile art in China redefine the contemporary lacquer language through the concept of lacquer as cloth/skin?
- Can a new Asian understanding of lacquer as a skin/cloth be constructed by illuminating Jules David Prown's theory of material culture?

### **Research Aims and Objectives**

The study and practice of lacquer as a traditional culture in the context of contemporary Chinese textile art has not been widely articulated. The aim of this research are to re-evaluate traditional lacquer culture and redefine the contemporary language of lacquer as cloth/skin; to explore a new understanding of the traditional Chinese expression of lacquer as a cloth/skin based on Jules David Prown's theory of material culture, thus shedding new light on Prown's theory of material culture; to extend new perspectives for the development of Chinese contemporary textile art and demonstrate the role of contemporary textile practice as a cultural heritage, thus giving Chinese textile art its cultural value through my practice.

The following objectives are used in order to meet the research aims:

1. Assessment of the current situation of lacquer art among Chinese and Japanese lacquer artists in order to explore the core value of traditional lacquer culture and establish the framework of lacquer art re-input in the context of Chinese contemporary textile art.
2. Identification of the limiting factors that affect the development of contemporary textile art in China and creation of an aesthetic expression of textile art with Chinese characteristics of 'lacquer as a skin/cloth' through the

combination of lacquer culture value and textile art based on Prown's theory of material culture.

3. Exploration of the new understanding of 'lacquer as a skin/cloth' and formation of workshop conditions to ascertain the final Xipi technology of lacquer and its application to the final practice. Different expressions of lacquer techniques will be used in the creation of the final textile art collection to express the search for self-identity (who I am) when lacquer is the first skin, and the search for appearance (who I want to be) when lacquer covers the skin as the second skin (cloth).

### **1.3 Research Background**

In an interview, Professor Shi Hui (China Academy of Art) described that contemporary fibre/textile art in China emerged in the 1980s, following the loom thinking that transformed European wall art (Beichen Yang, 2013). Textile art is the art that most prominently combines cultural uniqueness and cultural interaction (Seheila L. Cavanagh, Angela Failler & Rachel Alpha Johnston Hurst, 2013). For instance, we can feel the richness and differences between geo-cultures and the inclusion and construction of new age identities in the creation of many textiles' art forms (Shi, 2009b). The development of Chinese textile art, after being influenced by western wall art in the 1970s, has moved out of the traditional history of embroidery, weaving and printing to explore more possibilities.

According to Professor Lecheng Lin (2004), Chinese contemporary textile art can be divided into three periods. During the first period (in the late 1970s), knitting art focused on the graphic creation period. The second period (in the late 1980s), is the

developing period, namely, the three-dimensional performance period of soft sculpture art. The third period (in the late 1990s) is the improvement period, that is, the space shaping period via installation art. Thus, the development of contemporary textile art in China has experienced a comprehensive exploration stage from the pursuit of planar simulation painting to the application of three-dimensional expression and then to the combination of material, texture, space and culture.

However, the curriculum, teaching methods and innovative ideas of Chinese textile art majors are mainly influenced by the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University and China Academy of Art. Currently, textile artists mainly come from these two universities, which undoubtedly brings limitations to the development of Chinese contemporary textile art. In Feng Peng's study *The Chinese Turn in Contemporary Art* (2022), practitioners and researchers of contemporary art are inevitably influenced by the societies and cultures in which they work, resulting in a diverse landscape of contemporary art across the globe. Unfortunately, contemporary Chinese artists and theoretical researchers “are vague about the concept of Chinese contemporary art, we either avoid contemporary art or accept some foreign concept of contemporary art” (Peng, 2022:4). This influence will, on the one hand, enrich the development of Chinese contemporary textile art and on the other hand, weaken its uniqueness. The current thesis contributes to this growing area of research by exploring the aesthetic expression of contemporary Chinese textile art in the context of contemporary internationalisation.

According to Shi (2019a), textile is first considered a material and then a creative language, but my initial exposure to it was probably more specific, to the art of weaving or wall hanging. At that time, the art of weaving was included in the category of arts and crafts in China. One of the most influential figures in the history of Chinese contemporary textile art is the renowned Bulgarian artist Professor Marin

Ivanov-Valbanov, who came to teach at the China Academy of Art in 1980. It was when he presented wall-hanging art as a contemporary experimental gesture of weaving art that we realised the nature of the material itself as an artistic language, rather than the act of weaving itself (Ting Yu, 2019). Professor Ivanov-Valbanov guides contemporary Chinese textile artists to reactivate Chinese traditions and establish a new artistic language and art form to enrich their humanistic culture and further understand art, nature and society.

Chinese contemporary textile art is changing the old art pedigree, re-examining and re-defining some existing art forms, and expanding the boundaries of art. Textile art is not initially a wall hanging or a piece of fabric but a vehicle and a concept with cultural, material, social and even anthropological properties (Shi, 2019b). According to Jill Riley (2008), textile art could derive from traditional textile techniques and shoulders the mission of seeking self-identity and cultural inheritance. As one of the oldest arts in China, in the course of history, lacquer art has experienced a period of prosperity to decline, and then it went from decline to a revival (Song, Yang & Shafi, 2019). In the long history of lacquerware art development, although lacquerware in many cases takes the form of household utensils, its wealth and cultural symbolism far outweighs its practicality. Nevertheless, the number of people employed in lacquerware workshops, particularly the younger generation, has recently decreased across Asia (Kopplin, 2002). In the 1980s, lacquerware, like almost all traditional Chinese technologies, faced a crisis of widespread market decline and became a museum exhibit to be enjoyed. The short interruption of the inheritance of lacquer culture directly leads to the estrangement and strangeness of the public to lacquer (Weng, 2004). Today, the protection of lacquer art by the government only, remains in the continuous reproduction of the shapes and patterns.

Lacquerware, as the first layer of skin, cloth and carrier of ancient Mahogany furniture and various utensils, carries with it the Chinese appreciation of traditional culture and nature (Burmester, 1988). Based on the limitations of the development of Chinese contemporary textile art, this research will explore the aesthetic expression representing the uniqueness of Chinese textile art and redefine the language of traditional lacquer art by applying lacquer to textile art. Lacquerware is no longer attached to inanimate objects but to the natural body. The research will subvert this traditional lacquer technology by exploring the relationship between tradition and modernity, technology and art, skin and cloth.

#### **1.4 Research Methodology**

An interdisciplinary approach to textile art research methods has been elaborated in my practice. This is a cultural and practical research in the field of textile art, and the interdisciplinary method adopted draws its framework from the traditional technology of the combination of traditional lacquer art and textile art.

In the research on traditional lacquer art in Chinese contemporary textile art, it has been identified that the qualitative approach is ideal, because in contrast to the quantitative approach, which is narrowly focused upon a given number of set variables and testing of correlations, it “allows the researcher to tackle their research through a wider perspective in identifying patterns and linking various theories and ideas” (Brannen, 2005:174). As the nature of this research is primarily a critical study of textile art in a wide context of contemporary China, qualitative research is a much-needed approach, which allows flexibility and objectivity in seeking the method to apply lacquer as a skin/cloth to the contemporary Chinese textile design.

In order to address in detail, the set aims and objectives, the Practice Review is divided into below 6 main sections:

- Jules David Prown's theory of material culture
- Contemporary textile art in China
- Lacquer art
- Lacquer in textile art
- Lacquer as a skin/cloth
- The relationship between skin and cloth

The in-depth interview (face-to-face) will be focused on some practitioners who combine lacquer with textile art and the organisations that are concerned with the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture. The aim is to establish an understanding of the development tendency and limitations of contemporary Chinese textile art. The interview will also focus on the researchers who explore the relationship between cloth and skin, in order to create a new cultural value of lacquer through the concept of 'lacquer as a skin/cloth'. Besides, case studies about lacquer, artwork and artefacts analysis will also be used in this research.

## **1.5 Thesis Structure and Content**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis is structured across six chapters, each contributing to an interdisciplinary investigation of lacquer as both a material and conceptual medium within the field of contemporary Chinese textile art. The research progresses from theoretical exploration to practice-based experimentation and reflective analysis, integrating literature review, methodology, case studies, studio practice, and final evaluation.

As the opening chapter, this section establishes the foundation for the study by outlining the research context, identifying key questions, and articulating the aims and objectives that frame the enquiry. It also introduces the methodological approach and provides an overview of the thesis structure.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Search and Review**

This chapter consists of six parts. The thesis establishes a new understanding of Prown's material culture theory. At the same time, this chapter creates a definition and context for Chinese contemporary textile art. To be specific, this research will take The International Fibre Art Biennale, 'from Lausanne to Beijing' as the main research theme, analyse the outstanding contemporary fibre and textile artists, and explore how contemporary textile art expresses the techniques of the Chinese imagery and the beauty of contemporary fibre art. Furthermore, the review identifies the gaps in knowledge and opportunities for furthering the development of lacquer art culture values and techniques that this research may fill.

## **Chapter 3: An Interdisciplinary Textile Art Methodology**

This chapter expounds the research method established by combining interdisciplinary lacquer art and textile art. The whole chapter will establish a systematic research method. In addition, this chapter considers the qualitative research as the main research method and applies the experimental research methods to problem formulation, data collection, case study, artefacts analysis, interview and practice.

## **Chapter 4: Representation of Lacquer Culture Value in Chinese Contemporary Textile Design**

This chapter is divided into three main parts: (1) the value of lacquer culture, (2) lacquer culture's expression in textile art and (3) 4 case studies on the application of lacquer to textile art. This chapter proposes a new understanding based on the concept of lacquer as a skin/cloth and explains how to give Chinese contemporary textile art new aesthetic expression and cultural uniqueness by redefining the cultural value of lacquer. To this end, this chapter deepens the understanding of the value of material culture by examining different cases of lacquer applied to textile art and making the artefacts analysis of lacquer art, based on Prown's theory of material culture, to provide a theoretical basis for the following practice.

## **Chapter 5: Lacquer as a Skin/cloth Textile Art Collection**

This chapter details the flow of the entire practice with the concept of lacquer as a skin/cloth. In addition, the design brief, concept, design methods, materials, technologies, processes, experiments, aesthetics and outcomes are discussed. Furthermore, the practice results based on the research project 'lacquer as a skin/cloth' are analysed and an evaluation of the final exhibition is given.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

This thesis provides a comprehensive exploration of the cultural significance and applications of lacquer in contemporary Chinese textile art, utilizing Jules David Prown's theory of material culture. The research questions are addressed by redefining the traditional and contemporary language of lacquer as both a 'skin' and 'cloth', creating a bridge between ancient practices and modern artistic expressions.

Through the development and examination of the 'PALINGENESIS' and 'THE TAIL END OF TIME' collections, this study demonstrates how contemporary textile art can embody cultural heritage while fostering new aesthetic values and identities.

Significantly, this research underscores the attached and inherent values of lacquer, enriching the material culture discourse and offering new directions for future textile artworks. It highlights the dual role of lacquer as both protective skin and expressive cloth, aligning traditional values with contemporary design paradigms.

The limitations acknowledged pave the way for future studies to expand on the interdisciplinary methodologies and further explore the fusion of lacquer with other materials and technologies. In conclusion, this thesis not only contributes to the academic field by advancing a new understanding of material culture but also inspires practical applications in the realm of Chinese contemporary textile design.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Search and Review**

### **2.1 Chapter Introduction**

This chapter reviews the critical literature concerning traditional lacquer and textile art, given that a practical framework of theoretical support is constructed for research in the field of the mutual cross-border integration of lacquer and textile art. However, academic research on the combination of lacquer and textile art is limited outside China, and no complete or systematic academic research has been developed within China. Thus, this review critically contrasts and evaluates the field of cross-border integration of lacquer and textile art to address this gap and provide more

possibilities for the study of the integration of the two in the context of contemporary art.

Jules David Prown's theory of material culture is described in this chapter in order to create a theoretical framework and methodology, which I apply to the specifics of textile and lacquer art. This will shed new light on Prown's material culture theory within a cultural heritage context. Thereafter, a definition of contemporary textile art in China will be established and the limiting factors that affect its development will be identified. I will position the cultural value and technology of lacquer art as a tool for Chinese contemporary textile art and review the current adoption of lacquer technology in textile art and emerging textile research from the perspectives of cultural heritage and new lacquer language.

## **2.2 Jules David Prown's theory of material culture**

"Material culture is the study through artefacts of the beliefs-values, ideas, attitude, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time" (Prown, 1982:1). Meanwhile, Prown maintains that the study of material culture can be "regarded as a methodological branch of cultural history or cultural anthropology and material culture is the objective aspect of cultural research" (Prown, 1982:13). As society and culture are inextricably linked, the research on them cannot and should not be isolated. According to Prown's methodology, "artefacts are primary data for the study of material culture, and, therefore, they can be used actively as evidence rather than passively as illustrations." (Prown, 1982:9). A considerable number of current studies on the theory of material culture pay particular attention to cloth. For example, Prown (2001) described that the decoration, especially the clothing decoration, has the same advantage as the applied art, which is to embody a

relatively simple combination of function and style, thus allowing for the isolation and study of style. The practical part of the research uses lacquer to create a series of new artefacts of conceptual clothing. Lacquer as a material will be used as cultural evidence of the relationship between clothing, personal identity and values.

Prown also points out in his article 'Mind in Matter' that the "most obvious cultural beliefs associated with physical objects are related to values" and he divides the values into "Inherent Value and Attached Value" (Prown, 2001:69). Inherent value is the value of the structure of the object, which is determined by the rarity of the materials used. As long as the material persists in its value, the value persists in the object to which it attaches (Prown, 2001). The inherent value of Chinese raw lacquer lies in its rarity, since a lacquer tree can only produce 10 kilograms of raw lacquer over its entire life cycle, meaning that it takes 3000 lacquer trees to collect 1 kilogram of raw lacquer (Yi, 2019). In addition to the intrinsic value of the material itself, the people who initially made or used it and the values we attach to it today are more ephemeral or variable. This research puts forward the new definition of inherent and attached value by analysis but also through practice.

In addition to material and utilitarian values, some objects have the aesthetic value (art), some have process spiritual value (icons, cult objects), and some have attitudes toward other people or the world ("using materials in natural conditions, rather than remodelling materials" (Prown, 2001:7). Similarly, Carnwath and Brown argue that "the value of arts and culture is created in the encounter between a person (or multiple people) and an object (which may be tangible or intangible, as in an idea or activity)" (2014:8). In their view, value does not exist entirely either in the object or in the eye of the beholder but is produced in the connection of the two.

There are other theoretical frameworks that seek to expand our understanding of the value and impact of art and culture by calling attention to previously neglected parts of it. Some authors have proposed ways of dividing overall value into its constituent parts (Carnwath & Brown, 2014). For instance, Holden (2006) distinguishes between intrinsic, instrumental and institutional values; Prown (1982), as mentioned earlier, also distinguishes between intrinsic and attached values. However, a long-standing debate exists as to whether the properties of cultural objects can be disentangled or whether they can only be understood (Bourgeon-Renault, 2000). These attempts to analyse the values and influences of cultural experiences have been criticised for artificially drawing boundaries between types of values and influences that are intertwined as a whole, thereby undermining the appreciation of the whole.

It is evident that lacquer as a material is included in the category of applied arts as lacquerware and lacquer painting. The “applied art is the combination of art and craft, aesthetics and utility” (Prown, 2001:13). However, from the perspective of contemporary artists, the advantage of applied art in its simple function is that it is easier to separate out the powerful cultural symbol - style. Moreover, its expression will focus on style rather than content, and the expression of style will be influenced by both function and conscious purpose (Kuchler & Millar, 2010). In the applied art, the form and the function complement each other. Dainel Miller (2002) points that in addition to the functions of simplicity and constancy, the remaining variable is style, which embodies cultural values and attitudes themselves as well as their changes in time, space, class and so on. As far as material culture is concerned, what we pursue is the spirit and belief, and artistic works are the direct sources of cultural evidence rather than the means.

Prown (2001:13) identifies the key factors that “art is self-sufficient”. He attempts to write about artists as living beings shaped by their culture, to write their art as

material manifestations that, like all artefacts, are solid evidence of culture (Smart, 2003). If the viewer understands the artwork, it evokes a certain attitude towards reality that resonates with the attitude of the maker. We cannot truly experience the reality of being locked in time and space, but only experience it through the limited use of a craft as an information symbol and a tool. The research presents lacquer art as an independent artistic symbol, which serves as an emotional connection of existing culture and is the gift and promise of material culture. Since the reapplication of lacquer in textile art has become a special indicator of culture and a concrete expression of the belief in the reality of others in other times and places, it needs to be re-experienced and re-interpreted today. Based on Prown's theory of material culture, this research explores the application of lacquer art in Chinese contemporary textile arts and expounds the attached value of different meanings under inherent value. The original contribution of this research lies in the values attached to lacquer art, which are derived from contextualising it within contemporary Chinese textile art.

Jules Prown's distinction between inherent value and attached value provided a useful framework for understanding the outcomes of this research. The inherent value of lacquer is clear. It is rare, labour-intensive, and deeply rooted in Chinese cultural tradition. However, during the making process, many unexpected results occurred. Surface cracking, peeling, and incomplete drying, often caused by weather conditions, were initially seen as technical failures. Over time, I began to interpret these events differently.

These instances of failure revealed new material qualities that had not been anticipated. The roughness, fragility, or distortion in the surface challenged the conventional expectations of lacquer as smooth and controlled. Instead of removing or discarding these samples, I chose to preserve them. They became part of the

work, not as imperfections but as active contributors to its meaning. In this way, failure was redefined as a site of reflection and insight.

More importantly, the attached value of these objects was not fixed. It shifted over time and in response to environmental conditions. A surface that once appeared incomplete or unsuccessful might later be understood as expressive of tension, decay, or transformation. The meaning of the material changed as my perspective changed. This process showed that value is not only assigned through function or intention but also through duration, context, and observation.

Prown's theory supported this approach by framing artefacts not as passive outcomes but as active participants in cultural inquiry. The lacquer works produced in this research do not simply illustrate ideas. They embody a dialogue between material, time, and thought.

### **2.3 Definition of Chinese textile art - contemporary textile art in China**

Textile art is one of the oldest art forms in human civilization (Gillow and Sentance, 2009). According to Lesley Millar (2020:1), Professor of textile culture, "for the viewer, a wall hung woven tapestry may be considered as a kind of painting, and certainly it has traditionally occupied a similar place within the environment". Different regions and cultures have created people's distinctive aesthetics and expressions towards fabrics, which have now become part of human civilization. The role of textile art has been discussed by a large volume of published studies. For instance, Anna Ballarian (1966) raises the profound historical foundation of textile art, distinguishing it from other artistic creation categories. It is an art form combining original conception and embroidery. Its art is inseparable from craft and is going by different names in its constant development (Ballarian, 1966:29). Although it had a long

history in both the East and the West, it was only limited to a relatively narrow range of arts and crafts.

Chinese modern art has been deeply influenced by Western art forms and conceptions since the new China (the People's Republic of China) was founded in 1949. Due to historical factors, modern textile art's formation and development started from the revival of western modern tapestry art. Professor Lecheng Lin (2004) of Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University, while investigating Chinese textile art, suggests that the term 'textile art' tends to refer to the concept of fibre art. China has a long tradition of weaving and dyeing, such as Nanjing Brocade, Hangzhou Tapestry Satin, Chengdu Figured Satin, Suzhou Silk Tapestry and Xin Jiang Tapestries and Carpets are all over one thousand years old (Hui Shi, 2007). However, there is still a gap in the weaving technology development continuity as China experienced a long period of war during the modern industry development to maturity.

On the historical track in the development of Chinese contemporary textile art, Professor Yuehong Li (2000) from Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, classifies the development of Chinese contemporary textile art into three stages: revival, enrichment and development. Professor Lin (2004) believes that Chinese contemporary textile art can be divided into three periods in terms of time, name and artistic creation style, namely, Weaving Art - Period of Graphic Creation: Soft Sculpture Art - Period of being Stereoscopic and Installation Art - Period of Space Shaping. According to Lin and Ni (2010), the development of textile art in China can be divided into three periods: (1) Weaving art - Period of graphic creation; (2) Soft sculpture art - Period of being stereoscopic; and (3) Installation art - Period of space shaping. The development of modern fibre art in China has gone through a process from the pursuit of painting effect to the pursuit of three-dimensional expression and

then to the comprehensive exploration of the combination of material, texture, space and concept.

According to Professor Lin (2010), the development status of Chinese contemporary textile art has improved to a certain extent since 2000. However, there are still some deficiencies in the growth of Chinese contemporary textile art. Recently, attention has focused on the reason for the slow development of Chinese contemporary textile art. Meili (2007) mentioned that the primary reason consisted in the late start and slow development of the discipline. Domestic colleges and universities that set up textile art subjects or textile art courses are mainly influenced by the Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University and China Academy of Art. Notably, the curriculum setting, teaching methods, creative ideas and even the related lecturers at many colleges and universities come directly from these two universities, which has not only brought great limitations to the development of the discipline but also slowed down its speed and scope. The second reason is that its development is still mainly in the university, only limited to the academic exchanges between universities (Zhao, 2019). The third reason is that Chinese contemporary textile artists lack a good living environment. As a comprehensive, pluralistic and marginal art discipline, textile art should not be limited to a single major.

Recent research has suggested that Chinese textile art should “emphasize its own nationality and relative cultural diversity, and it is a feasible way for the development of Chinese contemporary textile art to introduce new elements, such as new materials, new technologies and new ideas based on the traditional cultural thoughts of the nation” (Shi, 2019:34). From the perspective of this research, the birth of Chinese contemporary textile art itself results from the in-depth development of contemporary art (Zhao, 2019). As Claudia Brown and Robert Mowry (2000) discuss, it is not so much that the contemporary textile art in China has a particular

inheritance relationship with the traditional textile and weaving technology, but that the concept of contemporary textile art again refers to the traditional textile and weaving technology. For a contemporary textile artist, inheritance and introduction are equally important. National culture can serve as the foundation of artists' creation, while new technology, new thinking and new materials are the source and pillar of artists' creation.

## **2.4 Lacquer Art**

This research explores the identity of contemporary Chinese textile art through a detailed critique of lacquer, which is one of the oldest arts in China that has experienced a period from prosperity to decline and from decline to revival with the change of history (Kopplin, 2002). Textile art derives from traditional textile techniques and shoulders the mission of seeking self-identity and cultural inheritance. However, innovation and change are the key words in the development of Chinese contemporary textile art (Brown and Mowry, 2000) Chinese contemporary textile art is changing the old art pedigree, re-examining and re-defining some existing art forms, and expanding the boundaries of art.

The development of the ancient Chinese lacquer art that “embodies the creation wisdom and aesthetics of our ancestors has been extended to lacquer ware, lacquer painting and three-dimensional lacquer craft” (Schilling et al., 2014:131-135). Professor Yushu Chen (2001:125) described how the development of Chinese lacquer art “has gone through a process of origin, development, heyday, weakness and revival”. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the context of the revival of traditional Chinese lacquer art. Similarly, Chang (2016:4)

wrote that “we need to think, what is revival, how to revive, and most importantly, why revive?”

Conversely, Lei Liang (2014:480-483) holds the view that the current situation of Chinese lacquer art language has been influenced by diversified cultures which have produced some changes under multiple factors, it reflects the acceptance progress of lacquer art in art and design context. This research will provide insights for re-evaluating traditional lacquer culture and demonstrating the new contemporary lacquer language in the context of contemporary textile art based on Liang’s discussion.

#### **2.4.1 Overview of traditional lacquer art language**

In the Neolithic period (also known as the new stone age) of China, after finding that the liquid of lacquer tree has corrosion resistance, strong acid resistance, strong alkali resistance, moisture-proof, insulation, high temperature resistance, mildew-proof, sterilisation, wear-resistance, strong adhesion and many other good characteristics after drying into a film, people began to use this naturally endowed material - Chinese lacquer. According to the Harry Mason Garner (1979), at first, lacquer was used for bamboo slips. Later, Shun (1940) lacquered the sacrificial vessels in black. Yu lacquered the outside of sacrificial vessels in black and painted the inside in red.” (Shun, 1940) In the long practice of lacquerware making, eastern nationalities have summed up many lacquerware making methods and lacquer surface decoration techniques, which became the first clothing of many objects (Andreas Burmester, 1988). Traditional lacquer art is a handicraft in East Asian and creative activity in the human development process, enabling people to understand nature, feel life, and reflect the cultural connotation and national spirit. This research

will use artefact analysis to shed new light on these connections and intrinsic values based on Prown's material culture theory.

In highly developed and industrialised modern society, the wares can be made of convenient materials and in the industrialised production mode (Liang, 2014). As lacquerware is challenging to produce in large quantities due to its material and technological characteristics, which caused the role of lacquerware in people's lives to change dramatically, from being used for decoration and collection gradually (Feng, 2016). Similarly, Yuan and Park (2020:111-127) believe that Chinese lacquer art has evolved from lacquer wares to lacquer paintings and lacquer sculptures. The language of lacquer art has gradually expanded from the traditional simple and practical decorative art to the artistic conception of creative expression.

#### **2.4.2 Background of lacquer art language development**

Many other influence factors impact the development of lacquer art language in addition to the industrial development restrictions (Feng, 2008). Firstly, under the trend of cultural assimilation in the world, all countries realised that national cultural identity is of great significance to the national cohesion necessary for national development. And each of them is looking for labels with national cultural symbols in the fields of science and technology, culture and art to inspire national cultural identity and national confidence (Luzzatto-Bilitz, 1988). Similarly, Feng (2008) found that lacquer culture is an inseparable part of Chinese civilization development, which includes the symbolic meaning of Chinese culture.

Secondly, lacquer can express the implication of subtle warmth through layers of application for its characteristics of vitality and colour conversion, which have

attracted artists to pursue the expression of emotion with the lacquer art language. For instance, Chinese lacquer artist Erke Gan (2021) said in the interview that the process of lacquering the object requires the use of three different colours of lacquer when making traditional Chinese Rhino Skin Lacquerware. In general, traditional Rhino Skin Lacquerware employs yellow, red and black colour, and the lacquerware ends up with an opaque finish. Thus, glittering gold leaf paper is used to replace yellow lacquer, producing the original design of radiant Rhino Skin Lacquerware with gold inlay (see Fig.1 and Fig.2). Due to the viscosity of lacquer, it can be combined with mineral pigments and metal pigments to show various artistic styles of lacquer artworks, such as colourful, implicit, realistic and abstract style (Garner, 1979). The changeability and mystique of lacquer art language determine the charm of lacquer (Norman, 2006). The chance encounter between providence and craft, together with the fusion of nature and art, brings to the works unforeseen chance and new artistic conception (Niimura, 2009). In the process of lacquer art creation, there are always surprises from time to time, and the anticipation together with the imagination for the unknown, are essential factors that attract today's artists to use lacquer materials in order to create.



Fig. 1 *Gilding* (2019)



Fig. 2 *Lacquer Plum Vase Decorated with Red Gold Spot Rhinoceros Skin Paint*  
(2013)

Thirdly, diversity is one of the characteristics of the development of contemporary art which includes the diversity of cultures or art works to express individual feelings produced by the collision of various kinds of cultures (Lu, Harigaya & Ishimura, 2004).

#### **2.4.3 Development of lacquer art from craft language to art language**

In the 1980s, lacquer painting was established in China as a kind of painting alongside ink painting, oil painting and woodblock (Liang, 2014). Since then, the content of lacquer art has included three aspects: lacquer painting, lacquer sculpture and lacquer ware (Yamasaki, 2020:13). On the basis of inheriting the traditional lacquer language, lacquer art language began to satisfy contemporary aesthetics through the interplay of the traditional art and contemporary art, international art and domestic art (Webb, 2007). This view is supported by Kopplin (2002) who states it is necessary to deconstruct and reconstruct the expression form, material and process of lacquer art, so as to form a lacquer art language in line with contemporary aesthetics.

However, since the artistic creation of contemporary lacquer art stresses the unity of visual presentation and the creator's emotional expression, contemporary lacquer art attaches great importance to the artistic sense of works (Lu, Harigaya & Ishimura, 2004). According to Niimura (2009), the destruction and construction of lacquer art languages are manifested in the separation of lacquer art from traditional crafts expression. "Once you understand how lacquer works, how it breathes and ages, then maybe you can start mixing it with other things. But you cannot skip the foundation. Tradition is not a museum. It is a root. You don't pull it out to plant something new. You grow from it." (Li, interview, 2023). Additionally, the selection of the most expressive combination of lacquer art language according to the artistic conception needs of creation develops the lacquer art language from craft to art. Indeed, the craft language of lacquer belongs to its intrinsic value. Based on Heckmann's (2002) approach and Prown's theory of material culture, this research will provide significant insights for exploring the more artistic language of lacquer, the added value, by combining the craft language of lacquer with the language of textile art.

#### **2.4.4 Expansion of lacquer art material and craft language**

With the rapid development of industrialization and information technology, new materials emerged in large numbers, modelling technology and part of craft gradually changed from traditional handwork to mechanical manufacture, while the boundary of lacquer art continued to expand (MacDonald, 2008). Under the support of 3D printing technology, the ideal shape of stereoscopic lacquer craft is directly constructed through computer 3D software modelling and output by 3D printing equipment, which significantly simplifies dozens of procedures for the creation of traditional lacquer, making it intuitive and easy to modify, and thus effectively avoids some of the

shortcomings caused by hand-made craft and improves the accuracy of modelling (MacDonald, 2008:48). However, there is an inconsistency with this argument. Gan (2014) indicated that the excessive use of contemporary technology will make lacquer art lose its original artistic value, because the value of lacquer art also represents the precipitation of time.

Currently, under the impact of multiculturalism, contemporary lacquer art language develops “from craft to pure art, transforms from visual aesthetics to conceptual expression, steps into the new realm pursuing artistic expression from the concept of craft and makes itself sublimated from the function of ‘appliance’ to the function of national culture edification” (Kuokuang Fan, Xuehui Li & Mengjia Lu 2020:95). Contemporary artists should have an open mind, vision, and thinking and apply lacquer art to a broader space by flexible using lacquer art and material language.

## **2.5 Lacquer in textile art**

### **2.5.1 The history of the combination of lacquer and textile art**

The combination of lacquer and textile art was practised as early as 7000 years ago (Wang, 2006). In the archaeological discovery of the third cultural layer of the Hemudu Neolithic site in Yuyao, Zhejiang, China, archaeologists unearthed a Lacquer Wooden Cylinder wrapped in rattan gabions, as shown in Figure 3 (ZHEJIANG PROVINCE MUSEUM, n.d.). The black lacquer wooden checkers excavated in 1973 in the village of Gaocheng, Hebei, China, are decorated with five layers of silk threads and a combination of cloud and thunder patterns to create an undulating effect, a combination of lacquer and fibre art that dates back thousands of years (Qiao, 2000). The application of lacquer to textile art was called lacquered yarn craft at the earliest in China (Norman, 2006). As a traditional fabric of China, silk has

a strong national cultural identity, which has made a great contribution to Chinese history and culture and exerted a profound impact on the global human civilization through the Silk Road (Wang, 2008). Furthermore, China is also the pioneer in the use of natural raw lacquer (Lee, 1972). The combination of raw lacquer and silk weaving is not just the combination of two traditional crafts, but more like the combination of two national treasures (Wang, 2008:64). With the change of history, the technology, shape and function of lacquered yarn craft have presented unique characteristics in different periods. As pointed out by Shen (1992), lacquer yarn has its own unique texture, technology and cultural meaning, making it different from other fabrics.



Fig. 3 *Lacquered Wooden Cylinder* (5000 BCE to 3300 BCE)

Lacquer yarn technology reached its first historical peak in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE). A Black Lacquered Gauze Cap (a type of hat worn by officials in

ancient times) from the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 9 CE) unearthed in the Mawangdui No. 3 Han tomb, Changsha, 1973 (see Fig. 4) is one of the best preserved and oldest Black Lacquered Gauze Cap ever found in China (Chen, 2004), which was woven from fine linen thread during the Western Zhou period, however, from the end of the Warring States period to the beginning of the Western Han Dynasty, the hat was made from silk and then coated with a large lacquer.

The use of the well-known Black Lacquered Gauze Cap continued until the end of the Ming Dynasty (1644 CE) and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE). However, in the Qing Dynasty, the shape of the cap was completely replaced, and officials did not need to wear this kind of cap (Chen, 2004). Without the support of the ruling class, the lacquered yarn craft gradually declined and almost completely disappeared till now.



Fig. 4 *Black Lacquered Gauze Cap* (202 BC - 9 AD)

In the Warring States Period (475 - 221 BC), lacquering textile became a common fabric coating technique (Jozwiak, Manczyk & Achmatowicz, 1985). The lacquered textiles, made of materials such as silk thread, ramie, Chinese lacquer and dry vegetable oil, are often used in clothing and rain gear for its tough, waterproof and wear-resistant characteristics (Huang, 2020). They are usually interwoven with silk or ramie. During the weaving of the main body, two groups of warps twist with each other and then separate to twist with the adjacent group again, to form a regular oblique square eyelet shape (see Fig. 5). The surface of woven textiles is coated with raw lacquer (Wang, 2004). Therefore, lacquered yarn has the characteristics of complex weaving, light weight, beautiful appearance and good ductility. The fabrics will become stronger and more resistant to water after being lacquered. Meanwhile, Lee (2008) indicated in her study of *The Ancient Lacquer Yarn Technology* that lacquering on the fabric surface increases the tensile breaking strength by 5.69% and the elongation by 9.92%.



Fig. 5 *Structure Diagram of Double Composition Belt in Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220*

CE

The use of lacquer and textile art is reflected in the use of fibre materials such as grass cloth and linen to mount lacquerware on wooden tyres to prevent them from becoming distorted (Xing, 2018). Especially in modern times (since 1980), when

aesthetics have taken over as the main creative component and purpose of production, the cross-border combination of lacquer and fibre art is no longer limited and there is more scope for development and creative possibilities. This research puts the traditional lacquered art into the contemporary context and discusses the evolution of the traditional lacquer in relation to contemporary textile art. Based on Prown's theory of material culture, this research will focus on artefact analysis of the intrinsic value of traditional lacquer yarn and reapply this traditional technique in the practice to explore the attached value of lacquer yarn.

### **2.5.2 The current state of cross-border integration of lacquer and textile art**

Lacquer, as a kind of natural resin coating, can harden and shape the fabric. Nonetheless, due to its inherent colour, difficulty in getting materials, high price, long drying time and other characteristics, it cannot satisfy the needs of modern industrial production (Jozwiak, Manczyk & Achmatowicz, 1985:316-319). According to my research, there is almost no academic research on the combination of lacquer and textile art abroad or in China. Some of the literature is mainly devoted to the use of different textile fabrics in the production of lacquerware from the perspective of lacquer techniques. At the same time, there is even less literature on the value and reflection of combining lacquer and textile art in the context of contemporary art. However, some artists have combined textile art with lacquer to create practical works.

For instance, Kazumi Nagano is a Japanese artist who reaches back to the ancient traditions and reinterprets these in a contemporary form. She uses metallic threads such as gold and silver, silk, nylon and Japanese paper threads woven together and coated with raw lacquer to create different colours and textured patterns

(BIJOU\_CONTEMPORAIN, 2015). The suppleness of the pieces facilitates interrelation with the human body and makes them more appealing to touch (see Fig. 6). Likewise, Suzumi Noda (2012) values the materials that others may have thrown away and turns these discarded materials that have lost their value into exclusive materials. Moreover, she combines the jacquard weaving card that has been superseded by modern weaving technology with expensive lacquer thread. She stated that “Through fusion of disparate materials, the value of the exclusive and the throw-away, the expensive and the cheap, come to have the same value” (see Fig. 7). Another of Suzumi’s works, completed in 2019, is based on a woodcut work by Japanese artist Kitagawa Utamaro depicting young women combing and washing their hair. She paints the silk with raw lacquer to give it the same lustre and weight as the wet hair (see Fig. 8).



Fig. 6 *Japanese Garden Autumn Brooch* (2011)

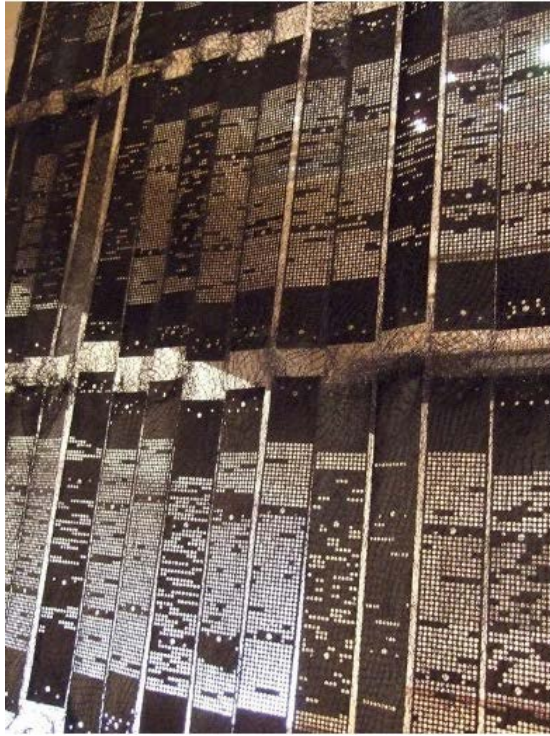


Figure. 7 *Cardboard Jacquard Punch Cards* (2019)



Figure. 8 *Woman Washing Her Hair* (2019)

In the 2013 Hubei International Lacquer Triennial, Ruan's work, *Expressions Series*, is a set of works in which many folds are created in the middle of a rectangular piece

of cloth, preserving these folds, shaped and lacquered on top. The black cloth is decorated with lacquer, gold and silver foil, while retaining the natural form and colour of the black cloth on the top and bottom for the final hanging, thereby creating a contrast between the black cloth and the coloured lacquer in the middle.

In lacquer art, natural vegetable oil can play the role of regulating the dilution of Chinese lacquer and adjusting the proportion of thinner to produce a kind of uneven characteristics (Garner, 1979). Turpentine, for example, not only adjusts the ink but also dilutes Chinese lacquer, making coloured lacquer look like oil paint. However, this technique is mainly used in traditional lacquerware and is rarely seen by textile artists. Guanzhen Wu, a contemporary Chinese textile artist, applied diluents to his lacquer art works to capture light and shadow through his grasp of the intensity and the relation between blankness and actuality of lacquer colour (Wu, 2001). He described that his works not only present “harmony and difference and a state of minutest contemplation through different shades of lacquer but also create a vivid visual sense of lacquer art inspired by light”. He explored the relationship between ‘virtuality and reality’ and ‘reality and nothingness’ from the perspective of the materials of lacquer and ramie. This study will explore a new contemporary language and value of lacquer art. Meanwhile, this research offers the first critical reading of Wu’s work set in the content of the specific research framework.

## **2.6 Chapter Conclusion**

The combination of lacquer and textile art has been present in China for over 7,000 years. However, very limited literature has provided empirical evidence for the use of lacquer in contemporary Chinese textile art. Most of the studies were on lacquer or textile art alone, but the combination of the two is still a relatively unexplored area.

Therefore, this literature review chapter aims to establish a theoretical framework for this research based on Prown's material culture theory. The core idea of Prown's material culture theory is the analysis of materials' inherent and added value.

The material under consideration is Chinese lacquer, applied within the realm of contemporary Chinese textile art to investigate its inherent worth, specifically its rarity and historical significance as a material (resembling lacquer as a skin). Additionally, the various supplementary qualities that lacquer imparts within this context contribute to a fresh interpretation of the theory, emphasizing its cultural relevance to the material (akin to lacquer as cloth).

The chapter also examines how Chinese textile art has developed and its limitations, defining what the study refers to as contemporary Chinese textile art. It also suggests that the development of contemporary Chinese textile art needs to emphasise its ethnicity, cultural diversity and traditional cultural thought and integrate it with new materials, technologies and ideas. The chapter illustrates the traditional language of Chinese lacquer art and analyses how it has been transformed from a crafted language to a more contemporary art language. As the literature on the combination of lacquer and textile art is limited, the study is extended to contemporary artists who have combined the two, providing the first critical reading of their work using lacquer in textile art.

### **Chapter 3. An Interdisciplinary Textile Art Methodology**

### **3.1 Chapter Introduction**

This chapter discusses the practice-based research methods and describes the methodological approach of this research. The methods of the interdisciplinary research are outlined according to different research areas (lacquer art and textile art). In a traditional sense, scientific research is investigative, setting out to prove or disprove phenomena. Science is analytic, design is inventive (Gregory, 1966). Textile design research makes use of specific design approaches, which will be discussed in this chapter.

The first part of this chapter analyses the research approaches of integrating lacquer and textile art, and focuses on existing literature related to design, materiality and craft knowledge. It considers how an interdisciplinary approach can benefit every stage of research and establish a practice-based research methodology from development to outcome.

The second part of this chapter highlights the key research methods. The research on traditional lacquer art, has identified that the qualitative approach is ideal, because in contrast to the quantitative approach, which is narrowly focused upon a given set number of variables and testing of correlations, it “allows the researcher to tackle their research through a wider perspective in identifying patterns and linking various theories and ideas” (Brannen, 2005:181). The experimental research methods will be applied to literature review, artefacts analysis, case studies, interview, and practical experiment.

### **3.2 Research Philosophy**

According to Dr Gemma Ryan (2018:42), a research philosophy: “outlines the beliefs and values that guide design, data collection and analysis of research.”. The philosophy of this study will be based on interpretivism, as it describes the philosophical principles that should complement the research choices regarding methods of inquiry, data collection and analysis. Ryan (2018) also argues that interpretivism holds that truth and knowledge are subjective, cultural and historical. Interpretivism mainly emphasises the influence of cultural and social factors on individual action (Phair and Warren & Jansen, 2021). In the same vein, Schwandt (2001) argues that the meaning of human action is inherent, and the task of the inquirer is to discover that meaning.

Interpretivism focuses on how humans understand/perceive their world. The analysis explores these meanings in the context of the academic literature in which researchers construct their questions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2020). However, Martyn Hammersley (2013) states in this process of exploring its limitations, the epistemology of interpretivism asserts that knowledge of a complex world is achieved through the study of the experiences and perspectives of the people who live in it. Hammersley (2013) also emphasises that interpretivism researchers should strive to understand the different ways of observing and experiencing the world through different cultures and avoid basing their own interpretations on studying events and people. Therefore, as a Chinese person, I will examine traditional lacquer, but at the same time it is necessary to place myself in the context of contemporary textile art. By doing so, this allows a more critical and comprehensive approach to the limitations faced in developing lacquer and Chinese textile art.

Lan Pham (2018) states that the first advantage of interpretivist research is that it uses diverse perspectives to look at phenomena and understand them in depth within a social context. Interpretivism is concerned with understanding the nature of

the world in terms of the individual's subjective experience (Catterall, 2000). Philip Powell (1993:1252) argues that there are no absolute 'correct' or 'incorrect' theories in interpretivism. Rather, they should be judged by how 'interesting' or 'meaningful' they are to the researcher and to those involved in the same field.

The second advantage is that interactive interviews can be used to explore what we cannot observe, to understand the values, prejudices, ideas, opinions and feelings of the interviewees (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007). However, in the view of Lindsay Mack (2010), interpretivism also has some limitations in that its ontological perspective favours subjective rather than objective understanding. For instance, the goal of hermeneutics is to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena in complex contexts, rather than generalising these results to other people and other contexts (Cohen, Manion & Marison, 2018). The study uses meaning-oriented methods such as in-depth one-to-one interviews (semi-structured and unstructured interviews) with contemporary textile and lacquer artists to gain a more objective perspective on the limitations of contemporary textile art development in China. The aim is to demonstrate the role of contemporary textile practice as a cultural heritage, thus giving Chinese textile art its cultural value.

The research is based on Prown's material culture theory, which identifies the inherent value of lacquer as a material influenced by historical context and culture. The other task of the study is to explore the new meaning and new attached value of lacquer and to combine it with contemporary textile. The aim is to gain a new understanding of the traditional Chinese expression of lacquer as a cloth/skin by creating an interaction between myself and the research participants in this study. The research discusses the integration of lacquer and textile art in the context of contemporary Chinese textile art, and it also explores the new concept proposed in this study, which is the connection and relationship between lacquer as skin and

cloth. It also aims to expand a new perspective on contemporary textile art in China by exploring the limitations of its development.

### **3.3 Design Research Approach and Strategy**

According to Professor Nigel Cross (2007), the idea that there is a specific concept of *Designerly Ways of Knowing* has been widely discussed in the academic literature in the design field. It has been interpreted as a combination of “practical and theoretical knowledge” (Newbury, 1996:16). “Practice is the application of skills, knowledge and expiries, through action or exercise” (Niedderer & Roworthe, 2007:3). In general, practice-based research is different from design practice (Cross, 1999; Durling, 2002), as it aims to acquire new knowledge (Archer, 1995). This has led Durling and Neidderer (2007:16) to define design practice in research as “investigative design”. As stated by Dr Elaine Igoe (2010:2), textile design is “a sub-discipline of design that has its own specific methodology.” However, Faith Kane (2016:252) described textile thinking as a “distinct branch of design thinking that makes an important contribution to flexible and connective problem-solving”.

Emerging design research methodologies are those in which strategies emerge from action over time are not always predetermined (Barrett and Bolt, 2007). Reflective practice is the cyclical process used to evaluate professional practice after reflection on action (Schon, 1983). It is believed that the creative process is essential to the discovery of the problem or the developmental stage of the research (Nimkulrat, 2012).

This research is related to the traditional craft of lacquer, and the craft approach can be described as one that involves hands-on creation, use of materials, and mastery

of the tool or medium (Adamson, 2007). Both Adamson and Carter discussed the importance of materiality for craft practitioners. Moreover, they identified a specific type of knowledge, “thinking through craft” (Adamson, 2007:7) and material thinking (Carter, 2004), to explore the new knowledge of lacquer as a material through the practice. This way of thinking through craft and materials is pictured in my textile art designs. For instance, for the redesign of textile fabrics I often start with the original yarn and create new fabrics by breaking out of the traditional yarn weave. Each craft has several steps. The lacquer craft, which is the focus of this study, is particularly complex. This study will select the most representative traditional techniques of rhinoceros skin lacquer (Xipi lacquer) and innovate on the different steps of the technique. The study will also look at different ways of using lacquer as a material, combining it with different fabrics, materials and yarns.

This research uses an interdisciplinary approach and brings new value and innovation to textile art by combining it with traditional lacquer art. While both technical and creative research makes key contributions to the expanding field of textiles, I suggest that an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates both scientific and artistic research methods can support sustainable innovation when “using newly established technical processes in a design context.” (Kane, 2015:1) This research is a study of cultural practices in the field of textile art, and the interdisciplinary approach adopted draws its framework from the combination of traditional lacquer art and textile art.

### **3.4 Research methods**

According to Glynis Cousin, qualitative analysis enables the researcher to “get a complex layer of meaning from research texts or visual data.” (2009:31) “Qualitative research uses words or visual images as the unit of analysis.” (Denscombe, 1998:6)

As pointed out by Denscombe, qualitative research tends to be associated with a “holistic perspective” (1998a:6), and “researcher involvement” (1998a:7). Indeed, the nature of this research is primarily a critical study of textile art in a wide context of contemporary China. Thus, qualitative research is a much-needed approach, which allows flexibility and objectivity in seeking the method to apply lacquer as a skin/cloth to the contemporary Chinese textile design.

This study has applied five main qualitative research methods: literature search and review, artefacts analysis, interview, case studies, practice experiment and qualitative analysis. This research first starts with a literature review to address the research question, in order to develop and provide an original contribution and create a theoretical framework for this research.

### **3.4.1 Artefacts analysis**

This research involves an in-depth study of traditional lacquer techniques, materials and culture values. Thus, theoretical and methodological questions concerning artefact analysis are extremely important for the research. Artefact analysis is the study of “how people use and conceptualise objects” (Martin & Hanington, 2012:18). It is an examination of the object’s qualities to better understand its users and the culture in which it typically exists. It also provides an opportunity for design researchers to systematically generate insights and inspiration for the future design work. By considering various aspects of an artefact, specific issues may arise. These aspects may include materials, structure, history, aesthetics, interaction, function, and space. Considering the possible unexpected uses of an artefact can also open further avenues for exploring traditional lacquer art.

According to Martin (2021), the components of an artefact analysis are material analysis, aesthetic analysis and interactive analysis. These analyses are conducive to obtaining the essential material values of lacquer (i.e. its intrinsic values) and the attached values of lacquer extended by aesthetic and interactive analyses based on Prown's material culture theory.

### **Material analysis**

Material analysis, which focuses on the physical characteristics, such as material composition, durability, wear patterns and disposability, will be applied to all the lacquerwares. Traditional lacquer technique is involved in this research, such as the traditional rhinoceros skin lacquerware and the well-preserved lacquered yarn cap unearthed from a Western Han Dynasty tomb (206 BCE–9 CE) at the Mawangdui archaeological site in Changsha, China.

The analysis of traditional lacquer begins with the material and function of the lacquer, in which different materials were combined with lacquer, such as wood, bamboo or other materials. In the case of cultural artefacts, the date of excavation and the degree of integrity of the lacquer are also discussed. The timing of the production of lacquerware depends on the technique used. The analysis of the material also includes consideration of whether other artefacts have the same function as the lacquer vessel under study to objectively view the physical and cultural value of the material as lacquer.

### **Aesthetic analysis**

The aesthetic analysis includes a subjective visual assessment as well as questions about historical references and emotional meaning (Martin & Hanington, 2012). This

is mainly subjective and relates to aspects of the visual appearance of the artwork. It can also include historical aspects of the object, such as a particular place, time, period and style. Aesthetic responses are thoughts and feelings initiated due to the character of these qualities and how they are organised and experienced perceptually (Silverman, 2001). As Silverman (2001) claimed, the sequence of questions in an aesthetic analysis could be: What do we see? How is it seen organised? What emotions and ideas are evoked from what has been observed? Similarly, Charles R Ewen (2003) also suggested that we should ask: how valuable is this? Could this be currently fashionable? Could this ever have been fashionable?

The gradual decline of the traditional craft of lacquer in China is not only due to the substitutability of the material itself but also due to the aesthetic fatigue of people. Lacquer is defined as traditional and archaic, and it lacks artistic value in line with contemporary aesthetics. Through aesthetic analysis, this study hopes to recreate art based on these in line with the contemporary context of lacquer.

### **Interactive analysis**

Interactive analysis is an interactive exploration of the operational and behavioural characteristics of artefacts (Martin & Hanington, 2012), which addresses the object's affordances and operational use: Is/was the object ever functional, instrumental, shared, and individual? According to the artefact questionnaire devised by Idit Saragusti (2017), it is essential to explore what else this object could be used for.

The expansion of lacquer art material and craft language meant that lacquer began to be used in different ways. This research broadens the scope of lacquer by applying it to contemporary textile art and bringing new functional, instrumental, shared and individual characteristics to lacquer art.

### 3.4.2 Interviews

The qualitative research interview is used as a key research method to this study. It seeks to get the story and meaning behind a participant's experience. According to Ann Oakley (1998), qualitative interview is a framework in which practices and standards are not only documented, but also achieved, challenged, and reinforced. Interviews allow the researchers to obtain first-hand information from identified parties who could uniquely contribute findings to the investigation. The purpose of the qualitative interview "makes it fairly straightforward for the researcher to locate specific ideas with specific people." (Denscombe, 1998:204).

According to Victoria Elliott (2018), individuals should not feel any compulsion to participate in research at any time, including any type of persuasion and deception to gain personal trust. The principle of informed consent involves sufficient information and guarantees participation, so that individuals can understand the meaning of participation, and without any pressure or coercion, reach a fully informed, well-thought-out and free decision on whether to participate or not. Therefore, on the one hand, the interviewer needs to provide an informed consent form before the interview. On the other hand, the interviewee must clearly agree to participate in the research and are informed that they are free to withdraw at any time and that all the documentation related to their participation will be destroyed.

The semi-structured interviews were used as two main interview format focus on different group of participants. In this research, 8 interviews were conducted with key figures, such as lacquer artists, contemporary textile artists and academics heading textile courses in universities in China.

## **Semi-structured Interview**

According to Robert G Burgess (1984), semi-structured interviews are seen as purposeful conversations and usually somewhere between structured and unstructured interviews. In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer prepares a few predetermined questions while the rest of the questions do not need to be planned. Given the specific audience and individuals who have been identified for interview, this research takes a semi-structured and in-depth approach and uses mainly open-ended questions, in order to obtain complex views and contexts that a standardised approach would limit. The interview questions are formed by research questions and key summarised findings. The analysed findings of these interviews are integrated into each chapter. These are based on recorded narratives and have substantially influenced the findings of this research.

The semi-structured interviews focus on some practitioners who combine lacquer with textile art and the organisations that are concerned with the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture. The focus has also been on the researchers who explore the relationship between cloth and skin, in order to create a new cultural value of lacquer through the concept of 'lacquer as a skin/cloth'.

## **Case study Interview**

Apart from that, a case study interview is used as a method to this research. According to Glynis Cousin (2009:142), a case study interview "may initially be information seeking, through which you also want to discuss your new ideas and elicit views, opinions and experiences.". The purpose is to understand the

development tendency and limitations of traditional lacquer art and contemporary Chinese textile art.

This research encompasses sensitive subjects within its final practical work production section. In Chapter 5, the study posits that lacquer serves as an extension of the skin, and, in the practical implementation, such as stretch marks and wrinkles around the eyes are employed to symbolize bodily markings. Nonetheless, many individuals tend to shy away from addressing these issues due to their personal nature. Consequently, a semi-structured interview format was employed during the interviews. The primary inquiries centred on the interviewees' emotions concerning these bodily marks, with further exploration being contingent on the interviewers' diverse perspectives of these marks. All three interviews were conducted anonymously, and following the acquisition of consent, photographs of the marked skin were taken as a part of my artistic practice and for reference in my artwork.

### **3.4.3 Cases studies**

In this research, a total of four case studies have been developed as part of the critical view of applying lacquer art to Chinese contemporary textile art in the context of its originality and identity (Chapter 4). According to Bell (2010), case studies offer an opportunity to investigate problems deeply and are suitable for individual researchers. Similarly, the prospect to gain some valuable insights depends on “the ability to investigate things in depth.” (Denscombe, 1998:58) Based on the definition of a case study, this research strategy is undoubtedly one of the most powerful methods employed by researchers to achieve both practical and theoretical aims.

As argued by Denscombe (2014), there are six possibilities of the purpose for a case study. This research uses these six possibilities to analyse each case based on the discovery-led (first four possibilities) and theory-led parts (the last two possibilities). Firstly, it starts with the description of the case to “describe what is happening in a case study setting.” (Denscombe, 1998:59) The second possibility is the exploration which requires researchers to “explore the key issues affecting those in a case study setting (problems and opportunities).” (Denscombe, 1998:59). Virginia Wilson (2011) also suggested that case study research is appropriate to be used for research with ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions. The next two are comparison and explanation, which requires “comparing settings to learn from the similarities and differences between them, and also explains the causes of cases, processes or relationship within setting.” (Denscombe, 1998:59) The last two possibilities are based on the theory-led illustration and experiment. The illustration part is to use a case study as an illustration of how Prown’s theory of material culture is applied in this research and to “use a case study as a testbed for experimenting with changes to specific factors (experiment).” (Denscombe, 1998:59) These six possibilities will be applied in a progressive relationship to my specific case study in order to shed new light on Prown’s theory of material culture within a cultural heritage context.

Within the required scope of this research, both transnational and local contemporary events are included to give a contemporary context to the investigation of textile art in contemporary China. The case studies selected are artists working in lacquer art, Chinese contemporary textile artists, and textile art exhibitions that emphasise the origins, philosophy and cultural identity. Below are 4 case study examples:

### **Case study on ‘From Lausanne to Beijing’ International Fibre Art Biennale**

In recent years, many art works of contemporary Chinese textile artists have been selected for large-scale textile art exhibitions in China and abroad. Meanwhile, some internationally influential exhibitions were held in China successively, such as “The First Chinese Fresco Exhibition” and “Beijing International Art Biennale”. Particularly, the ‘From Lausanne to Beijing’ International Fibre Art Biennale first held in 2000 has provided not only a platform for Chinese textile artists to present, but also an opportunity for international textile artists to exchange and cooperate.

This research takes ‘From Lausanne to Beijing’ International Fibre Art Biennale and analyses the representative works of Chinese textile art in previous exhibitions, so as to further explain the development characteristics of Chinese contemporary textile art. Also it shows the extension of the traditional artistic language of fibre art and the influence of the exhibition on the development of contemporary textile art in China.

### **Case studies on the application of lacquer to textile art**

Case studies on the application of lacquer to textile art focus on three artists.

Although they all use lacquer as a material in textile art, their expressions convey a different understanding of the traditional art of lacquer. By analysing and comparing their works, it is possible to gain an insight into different values they give to lacquer. Beyond that, it will position the cultural value and technology of lacquer art as a tool for Chinese contemporary textile art.

#### **Xipi Lacquer (rhinoceros skin lacquer) Colour and Technique - Lacquer Artist:**

##### **Erke Gan**

Erke Gan has established a new standard of lacquer craftsmanship and breathed life into this traditional art through new technological innovations (THEMET, 2019).

Among Gan's various lacquer styles, the most prominent is the technique known as 'rhinoceros hide' (rhinoceros skin lacquer, Xipi lacquer art), a kind of millefiori effect achieved by applying multiple layers of coloured lacquer and polishing them into a single smooth surface (Li, 2019). Contemporary artists should constantly reflect, ask questions, and awaken in the process of innovation of 'daily use is the way', making the traditional rhinoceros skin lacquer gradually break through the simple craft (Gan, 2019).

### **Textile Art in an Oriental Aesthetic - Textile Artist: Guanzhen Wu**

Guanzhen Wu is a Chinese contemporary young textile and lacquer painting artist. The artworks of Guanzhen Wu make it possible to appreciate traditional lacquer craftsmanship. Meanwhile, contemporary lacquer is used to express conceptual artistic thinking, which is the appeal of contemporary lacquer art. Instead of following the stylised expression of lacquer art, Guanzhen Wu adopts lacquer as a vehicle to express the invisible spirit in a visible art form.

### **Lacquer Art Interpreting the Language of Western Contemporary Art - Lacquer and textile Artist: Jijun Weng**

Jijun Weng is a lacquer and textile artist who has "inherited traditional Chinese artistic thinking" (Weng, 2004:35). However, he is influenced by the language of Western modern painting and uses "the art of lacquer to interpret the language of Western contemporary art." (Weng, 2004:37) The greatest difference between lacquer art and other arts "lies in the specificity of the lacquer language itself." (Weng, 2015:84). Weng uses the oxidation process of lacquer.

### **3.4.4 Practice Experiment**

While establishing experimental conditions for this research, the initial exploratory phase allows for experimentation with a wide range of parameters and materials (described in detail in Chapter 5). A technical understanding of the process and lacquer textile is also the key to this study. It will mainly record the conditions, materials, technologies and equipment used in the whole research process. Through the analysis of the specific cases, new techniques for this practice are tested for the traditional Chinese lacquer yarn technology, Xipi lacquerware and lacquer painting. Apart from that, a series of experiments have been performed to support the practice of the research with the new applications of the technology. The experiments conducted therefore take the form of systematic sampling, creative sampling, and technical testing, as described below.

#### **Exploratory Creative lacquer textile sampling – lacquer as a skin**

In the exploratory phase of my practice, 'lacquer as a skin' is meticulously examined through the application of lacquer on semi-sized Xuan paper, chosen for its semi-translucency and ability to mimic the delicate yet durable characteristics of human skin. This phase aims to investigate the intrinsic values of lacquer, such as its protective and aesthetic qualities, while exploring its adaptability as a medium on a non-traditional textile substrate.

Semi-sized Xuan paper, with its coarse fibres and partial transparency, serves as an ideal medium to highlight the dual function of lacquer—both as a protective barrier and a conduit for artistic expression. The process begins with the application of a thin base layer of lacquer, enhancing the paper's durability while maintaining its natural

texture and appearance. This base layer is crucial as it sets the foundation for further experimental applications.

The method involves drawing fine lines with lacquer on the Xuan paper, utilising traditional lacquer painting techniques to explore the material's capacity for detail and its interaction with light. The semi-translucent nature of the paper allows light to pass through, illuminating the lacquer's depth and enriching the visual experience. This interplay of light and texture not only emphasises the aesthetic qualities of lacquer but also its role in adding value to the material it covers.

This exploratory creative sampling critically evaluates how lacquer, when applied as a skin, transforms the paper into a robust yet expressive artistic medium. By focusing on the intrinsic properties of lacquer—its durability, sheen, and protective nature—the research underscores its potential to transcend traditional applications and reassert itself in contemporary textile art.

This methodology not only revitalises traditional lacquer techniques but also contributes to the ongoing discourse in material culture by redefining the boundaries between traditional crafts and contemporary art practices, demonstrating how ancient materials can be reinterpreted in modern contexts to express and explore contemporary cultural identities.

### **New artefacts in the field of conceptual clothing creation – lacquer as cloth**

In the 'lacquer as a cloth' section, the experimental methodology focuses on the use of traditional Xipi lacquer as a conceptual fabric to create new artworks. This involves exploring how this traditional lacquer technique can be adapted to contemporary

textile art, integrating the material's intrinsic and added values with innovative fabric designs.

The initial stage of the experimental process involves preparing substrates for lacquer application. These panels are first subjected to a meticulous sanding process to ensure a smooth, flawless base, crucial for the subsequent layers of lacquer. Following the preparation, the core experiment challenges the traditional Xipi lacquer production process, such as during the 'cloth mounting' stage, by integrating unconventional materials like tissue, cling film, and various fabrics. These materials are not tightly fixed but are allowed to randomly overlay, challenging traditional lacquer techniques and introducing a dialogue between visibility and concealment in the final pieces.

The practical application of lacquer as cloth aims to test the boundaries of using lacquer in textile art, providing insights into its protective qualities and potential for aesthetic innovation. The final artworks display the adaptability of lacquer in modern design and its capacity to convey complex identities and narratives, exploring the added value brought by the concept of lacquer as a cloth.

### **3.5 Qualitative Analysis**

According to Denscombe (1998), the purpose of analysing something is to gain a better understanding of it. Through a detailed examination of the thing that is being studied, the analysis aims to describe how it works and interpret what it means (Denscombe, 1998:261). Similarly, qualitative data analysis explores themes, patterns, stories, narrative structure and language within research texts “(interview

transcripts, field notes, documents, and visual data) in order to interrupt meanings and to generate rich depictions of research settings.” (Cousin, 1998:31)

Reflective practice, as a form of analysis, is applied throughout the research process. It is cyclical, running through and feeding back into each stage. The process of reflection is integral to decision-making, providing direction and generating ideas during and after the practical work. It is also referred to as “reflection in action and reflection on action” (Schoon, 1983:97). In both cases, critical reflection informs the next steps of action.

According to Lisa Grocott (2012), the field of the project creates a space for practitioners, in which each step taken provides further insight into the topic being explored. The questions that arise from practice prompt further practical exploration, a process that is repeated over and over again. It details the flow of the entire practice with the concept of lacquer as a skin/cloth. In addition, the design brief, concept, designing methods, materials, technologies, processes, experiments, aesthetics and outcomes are discussed. Furthermore, the results of the practice based on the research project ‘lacquer as a skin/cloth’ are analysed, and the final exhibition is evaluated.

## **Dissemination**

The use of this series of practical works has informed the discussion and documentation of potential strengths, impacts and feasibility. This takes the form of conference papers, reports, presentations, and working exhibitions. Project meetings, regular presentations and discussions with professionals in the textile and lacquer arts and participation in exhibitions also provide feedback to inform the direction of future work.

### **3.6 Chapter Conclusion**

In this chapter, a comprehensive examination of practice-based research methodologies has been undertaken, with a particular emphasis on the suitability of qualitative research approaches. The distinct characteristics of the 'textile design approach' have been explicated, underlining its relevance within the scope of this investigation. Furthermore, the chapter provides an extensive overview of the research methods underpinning the inquiry, encompassing literature review, artefact analysis, interviews, case studies, and practice experiments. These methods are thoughtfully integrated into the research design, each fulfilling a specific role in unravelling the cultural significance and creative possibilities of lacquer in textile art.

This study, which is anchored in practice-based research and design-led exploration, embraces an interdisciplinary approach rooted in textile design principles and is complemented by action research strategies. Additionally, the research methodology incorporates the use of artefact analysis as a tool for dissecting the function and aesthetics inherent in traditional lacquer artefacts. The interdisciplinary nature of the textile design approach, as elucidated in this chapter, facilitates a profound exploration that amalgamates various realms encompassing art, culture, and intrinsic value.

This research not only discerns the inherent value of lacquer art but also conducts an exhaustive aesthetic analysis, extracting additional value from lacquer art through the prism of Prown's theoretical framework. Furthermore, the inclusion of specific case studies and interviews within the domains of both lacquer art and textile art provides invaluable insights into the contemporary developmental landscape of China. This, in

turn, lays a solid foundation for charting the future trajectories of lacquer and textile art. To ensure a consistent and comprehensive evaluation of the cultural value of lacquer in textile art, an analytical framework has been methodically established. This framework encompasses diverse aspects, including design and application, aesthetics, tactility, and functionality.

Conclusively, practical experiments conducted as part of this project have yielded empirical data, with qualitative analysis serving as the primary research method. This methodological approach has played a pivotal role in guiding the study towards the successful realization of its practical objectives.

## **Chapter 4. Representation of Lacquer Culture Value in Chinese Contemporary Textile Design**

### **4.1 Chapter Introduction**

The study has placed significant emphasis on comprehending the multifaceted nature of lacquer, particularly in terms of its intrinsic value and the attached value, as posited by Prown's material culture theory within this study's theoretical framework. However, this chapter primarily delves into the cultural significance inherent in lacquerware. This cultural value, in turn, bestows upon lacquer a novel and distinct form of attachment and meaning. The various case studies explored within this chapter provide insights into lacquer's traditional, memory, and rebirth attributes within the broader context of cultural significance.

A definition of contemporary Chinese textile art has been mentioned in Chapter 2 that Contemporary Chinese textile art represents a multifaceted artistic evolution

influenced by both traditional Chinese weaving heritage and modern Western art forms, characterized by its dynamic exploration of materiality, three-dimensionality, and conceptual integration. The first case study described in this chapter is 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale. Based on an analysis of the historical development of the exhibition, the exhibited works go on to explore new concepts of the traditional language of fibre (textile) art. It includes the combination of some traditional crafts with textile art and the extension of tapestry weaving. In this exhibition, the exchange, fusion and collision of multiple cultures will be seen. The current state of development of contemporary Chinese textile art and some of its limitations is also analysed.

The second case study analysed in this chapter is the introduction of lacquer art in the context of textile art, by Erke Gan, the most famous contemporary Chinese lacquer artist. In an interview, a gallery curator noted: “Gan’s works always feel like they are speaking across generations. The lacquer is traditional, but the forms are completely current.” (Participant A, Interview, 2023). Gan who is not only a lacquer artist, but also a craftsman, has continued the traditional rhinoceros skin lacquer technique to its fullest extent. His work is analysed in terms of concept, colour and technique to define Gan's understanding of the value of lacquer as a material.

The third case study analysed in this chapter is that by the textile artist Guanzhen Wu. Wu's artwork has a unique oriental aesthetic that has had a substantial impact on this research. His works, which are mainly a combination of ramie and lacquer, portray a new expression of traditional lacquer painting. He uses lacquer as a vehicle for expressing the idea of the uninspired in a tangible art form. He will also analyse how this theory can be applied to my own research.

Lastly, the fourth case study is by the lacquer artist Jijun Weng, whose art is seen by Chinese artists as relatively Western. Interestingly, this notion of 'Western' art is itself a Chinese interpretation of what is commonly considered Western art. However, he uses traditional lacquer to portray the language of Western contemporary art, exploring a path towards contemporary lacquer art and expressing his perception of the value of lacquer as a material.

The perception and application of this same material, lacquer, varies from artist to artist. Their understanding of lacquer is based on a variety of additional factors, such as the context in which it was created, the environment in which they grew up and their personal artistic style. It is also these different additions that allow them to assign different cultural values to the same material.

## **4.2 Case study 1: 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale**

### **4.2.1 Creation Background**

Early Chinese contemporary art symbolised individualism within collectivism in the West, with works like Cynical Realism and Political Pop gaining international recognition. Influenced by the Cultural Revolution, new art emerged, exploring Mao iconography and rebellious themes. However, to some extent, Chinese artists as the 'other' are purely 'aestheticised' as exotic objects, rather than individuals who actively and valuably engage in international cultural exchange. Today, in the development of international artistic events both within and outside China, other alternatives are rapidly emerging and continuously evolving. Professor Jiehong Jiang (2018:3) argues that "cultural traditions have been a mine of particular energy, an energy that empowers a kind of 'uniqueness' for art production." Embracing cultural traditions has

become a vital strategy, empowering Chinese art with uniqueness while challenging Westernised norms.

Chinese artists were often stereotypically viewed as exotic objects rather than active contributors to global cultural exchange. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the representation of contemporary textile artworks by Chinese artists at major textile art exhibitions, both domestically and internationally. This surge aligns with China's role as host to several globally recognized exhibitions, including the 'International Textile and Apparel Fair (InterTextile Shanghai)', the 'First Chinese Fresco Exhibition', and the 'Beijing International Art Biennale'. This phenomenon not only highlights the ascending prominence of contemporary Chinese textile art on the global stage but also reflects an expanding international interest in China's rich textile heritage and its innovative artistic expressions. As a growing number of Chinese artists delve deeper into textile mediums, their inventive works spark dialogues about merging traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design ethos, thus fostering a cultural synthesis between East and West.

One standout event among these exhibitions is the 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale, which made its debut in the year 2000. This biennale has not only provided a crucial platform for Chinese textile artists to showcase their talent and creativity but has also acted as a catalyst for fostering international collaboration and artistic exchange among textile artists from diverse backgrounds. It has become a melting pot where global textile artists converge to share their ideas, techniques, and cultural influences, enriching contemporary textile art in the process.

The concept of fibre art gradually gained recognition after the middle of the 20th century. The rise of contemporary fibre art is closely connected with several exhibitions, including Lausanne Biennale (1962-1992), Lodz Triennial (1975-now),

from Lausanne to Beijing International Fibre Art Biennale (2000- now) among others. Since the 1950s, international exhibitions have played a significant role in the international fibre art movement, promoting the formation and growth of fibre artist groups and enhancing the social influence and international recognition of fibre art. Since 2000, the 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale has been held 10 times, during the past 19 years. The exhibited Chinese textile/fibre artists have been further expanded in terms of materials, techniques and forms of expression. In the 1960s, under the initiative and influence of Lurcat, Lausanne held the world's first open exhibition of international tapestry art biennale, pioneering the ancient craftsmanship to a new realm of art. This Biennale lasted for more than 30 years, and artists from different countries have been communicating with each other while displaying their excellent works, which has set off new shocks and waves in form and concept.

The author Giselle Eberhard Cotton (2017) points that in 1996, the Lausanne Biennale regrettably announced its closure for reasons of content and finance, which in a way, deprived international fibre art of a centre of activity and a stage for presentation. Professor Lecheng Lin of the Academy of Fine Arts at Tsinghua University was the first person in the Chinese fibre art community to learn of the discontinuation of the Lausanne Biennale. After years of appealing and benefiting from the support of all parties, the first 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Biennale of Fibre Art opened in Beijing in October 2000. Its richness should boil down to culture. 'From Lausanne to Beijing' is not the end of Lausanne but its creative continuation. In 2021, amidst unprecedented global challenges posed by COVID-19, the 11th edition of the exhibition, hosted by Tsinghua University's Academy of Art & Design alongside the China Arts and Crafts Association, innovatively adopted an online format. This digital approach enabled engagement with thousands of artists from over 50 countries worldwide. Curator Ni Yuehong

(2021) highlighted the significance of this event as a reflection of the intertwined nature of global economies, the complexity of political landscapes, and cultural diversity (Tsinghua University, 2021). Through the universal medium of fibre arts, the Biennale served as a pivotal platform for artists to share and express their distinct artistic values, thereby illuminating common human experiences and challenges.

This research will take 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale as a historical section, analyse and study the representative works of Chinese textile art in previous exhibitions, to further of Chinese contemporary textile art. The first section 'the extension of traditional artistic language of textile art' initiates a discussion around the traditional artistic language of textile art under new scrutiny in the context of multiculturalism, covering application of traditional Chinese craft, tapestry weaving craft and textile art to architectural space, as well as its influence on Chinese contemporary textile art creation.

The second part mainly explores the role of the 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale in promoting the diversified Chinese contemporary textile art from the perspectives of the exchange and integration of diverse cultures and the cross-border creators of textile art.

#### **4.2.2 Extension of Traditional Artistic Language of Fibre Art**

##### **Application of traditional craft to textile art**

As China pushes forward the development process of textile art, more and more textile artists find that some foreign artists not only employ contemporary artistic concepts, but also incorporate the traditional weaving, dyeing and printing techniques

and aesthetic culture of their own nationality into their works. And it's not just a simple, crude stereotype, but also an allusion to lifestyle, hierarchical order, and cultural character.

For example, the senior Japanese fibre artist Kusama Tetsuo's '*Mirage Lau*' (as shown in Fig. 9) applies cotton, plastic and other materials to the traditional weaving process of his nation, making itself into a textile work of Oriental Zen (i.e. quiet and profound feeling of freedom) composed of three long strips through subtle variations in colour from blue to dark red to orange.

Another textile artist, Fukumoto Shihoko, also from Japan, uses traditional Japanese 'dyeing' techniques. Her work *Summer Night* (as shown in Fig. 10) draws the outline of the poetic realm of "the bright moon shines over the sea and from far away we share this moment together" through the colour gradient in traditional dyeing and the calm and concise geometric composition.

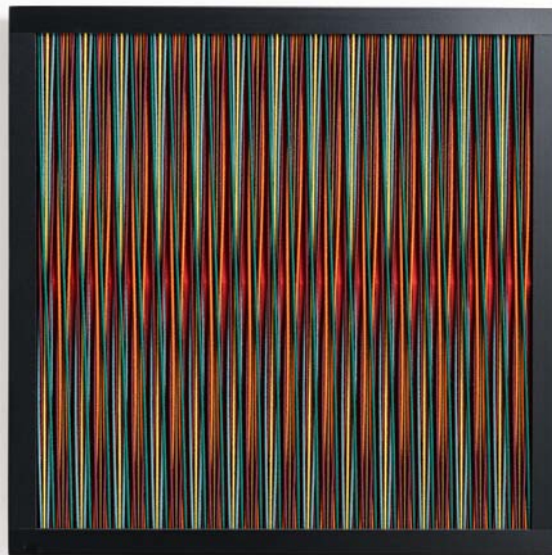


Fig. 9 *Mirage Lau* (2021)

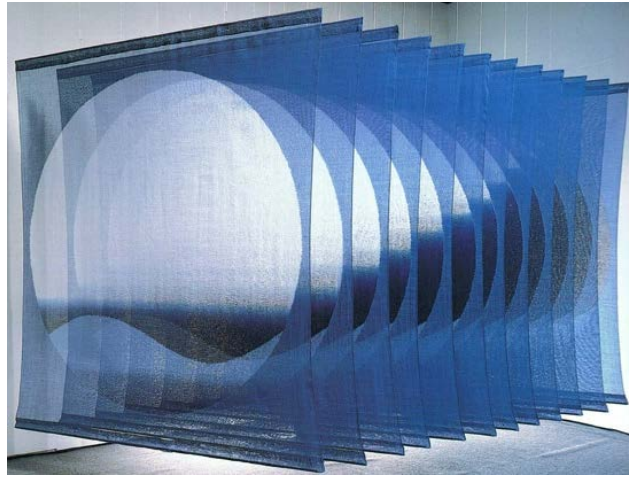


Fig. 10 *Indigo is the colour of my dreams* (2010)

Therefore, in the views of Yushuwen Feng (2018), Chinese contemporary textile artists began to re-examine and explore the fabrics that are made by traditional materials, forms and techniques like weaving, sewing, embroidery, and dyeing and have broken away from the traditional social background. Their role in contemporary society is gradually changing. In the eyes of Chinese textile artists, they have become a specific cultural symbol which acts as a contemporary way of emotional expression using traditional materials and traditional crafts.

### **Extension of tapestry weaving**

Chinese textile artist Shuang Qiao (2005) states in the 1980s, the contemporary textile art concept and mature tapestry weaving art showed in front of the Chinese artists. Modern tapestry works with a new concept of creation, woven with the traditional fabric weaving skills, preserving the original unique warm and safe emotional memory of humans for fabrics were immediately accepted by Chinese fibre artists (Qiao, 2005). Eryu Zhan (2013:38-40) contends that the evidence clearly shows when Chinese textile art develops to the present, some textile artists are actively engaged in the practice of new materials, new expression techniques and new

creation concepts, and they are exploring new fields of textile art with great enthusiasm. However, some artists still choose the classic approach for artistic creation, which, however, is not a copy or regression in a sense, but a dialogue from the perspective of contemporary people on traditional tapestry weaving across the distance of time and space. This is not only the persistence and extension of the traditional techniques of modern textile art, but also artists' sensitivity to natural textile materials and 'feeling' of traditional forms. Chinese contemporary textile art itself thereby becomes more diversified and shows a broader inclusiveness.

In the fourth International Fibre Art Biennale, Chinese textile artist Lecheng Lin's *Memory of Childhood* (as shown in Fig. 11) is such a tapestry work with classic artistic tendencies. It uses natural wool materials and combines traditional Gobelin weaving techniques with plush fabric to express his feelings for northeast China, where he grew up.

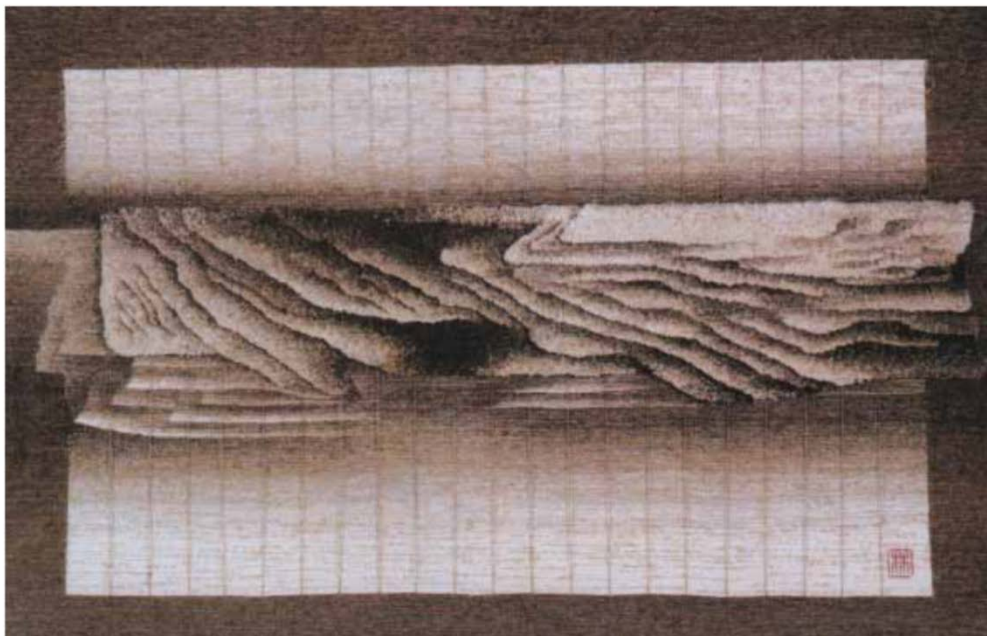


Fig. 11 *Memory of Childhood* (2008)

### **4.2.3 The influence of the 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale on the development of Contemporary Fibre Art in China**

#### **The exchange and integration of diversified cultures**

In all previous sessions of 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale, the works of Chinese artists and those of foreign artists occupy half of the fibre exhibition, which is a good indication that fibre art exhibition is truly international, and the exhibition itself builds an open and free communication platform for cooperation and exchange without any prejudice (Lin & Ni, 2010:25-31, 32-40). Since the beginning of the 1980s, the artistic style of Chinese textile art has been characterised by continuous communication and integration with diversified cultures. Western avant-garde art and conceptual art popular in the Chinese art circle in the mid-1980s had an influence on fibre art (Lu, 2010:103-106). In particular, the 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale held at the beginning of this century has promoted the exchange between Chinese and Western aesthetic culture and weaving culture, classical art and popular art. The creation concept of contemporary textile art works in China is constantly producing a new look in such blending.

In this environment, the outward cultural exchange and reference are mainly embodied in two aspects: on the one hand, the latest achievements of international fibre art will be displayed on the Chinese stage, so that Chinese textile and fibre artists can more directly feel the new look brought to textile art by contemporary art trends under the international background (Textile Forum magazine, 2018). These outstanding foreign textile and fibre art works brought a certain impact and inspiration to the contemporary Chinese textile artists participating in the exhibition, especially the adventurous and practical young textile artists from universities. One of the

criteria of describing an art exhibition most used is the virtue of novelty (Cygan, 2011). However, there is an inconsistency with this argument. The most challenging aspect facing contemporary Chinese textile art is the lack of creative ability. Creation is not something that can be created out of nothing, and it should not be a matter of simply learning from Western art and appropriating it to impose an international label on one's own work (Li & Hao, 2010). How to dialectically examine the value of their own material and how to retain their own artistic expression will need to be explored by all the Chinese contemporary artists.

On the other hand, this outward cultural exchange is also reflected in the display of the art works of Chinese artists to the world (Jude, 2012). Through the exchange of textile art works and the collision of different ideologies, the aesthetic tastes of different nationalities have become more intuitive, which has also become a new source of inspiration for some foreign fibre artists. The development of contemporary fibre art not only provides the experimental field of contemporary art but also reflects the value and significance of neutral thinking in the future development of art (Zou, 2016:6).

From the Chinese textile artworks in the Biennale, Chinese contemporary textile art is gradually becoming diversified and open, both in form and style (Shi, 2009:64). Some artists still maintain their own craft, while others tend to be an independent pure art category and emerging creative media. The mix of different art forms, cultural concepts, artistic styles and means of expression in contemporary Chinese textile art allows us to see more possibilities for the expansion of contemporary Chinese textile art. However, Professor Lin (2010) argued that the current development of Chinese contemporary textile art inevitably leads to the question of whether textile art still retains its own artistic language purity. Perhaps this is a necessary process that Chinese textile art needs to undergo in order to develop. This trend of traditional

cultural interventions is also a microcosm of contemporary art in a multicultural context.

The absence of traditional cultural values in contemporary Chinese textile art has led to a certain sense of brutal horizontal extension, that is, an obsession with pursuing new art forms similar to Western textile art. The intention to learn from others is worthy of recognition, but excessive borrowing without a personal attitude, blind acceptance, and a lack of affirmation of one's own values will inevitably lead contemporary Chinese textile art into obscurity. The value of traditional culture does not stop at inheritance alone. This study re-creates lacquer as a traditional culture in the context of contemporary textile art, and lacquer is the vehicle for the creation of a new Chinese cultural identity inspired by this research. The different ways in which artists have recreated the traditional culture of lacquer will be critically discussed in the following sections.

### **4.3 Case study 2: Colour and Technique in Xipi Lacquer – Lacquer Artist: Erke Gan**

#### **4.3.1 Creation Background**

Recognised as the Sixth Chinese National Master of Arts and Crafts in 2012, Erke Gan has established a new standard of lacquer craftsmanship and breathed life into this traditional art through new technological innovations (THEMET, 2019). Among Gan's various lacquer styles, the most prominent is the technique known as 'rhinoceros hide' (rhinoceros skin lacquer or Xipi lacquer art), a kind of millefiori effect achieved by applying multiple layers of coloured lacquer and polishing them into a single smooth surface (Li, 2019).

The most characteristic feature of Xipi lacquer is that all its designs are not consciously depicted, but rather the artisans express the hills and valleys in their minds unconsciously, as if they were infusing them with their souls. This makes the emergence of rhinoceros skin lacquer associated with “modern design, its texture design ideas and modern graphic reconstruction theory, bionic design philosophy, and design ideas.” (Sun and Shu, 2020:6). This research applies ‘rhinoceros hide’ (Xipi lacquer) to the creation of textile art and analyses Gan’s innovative understanding of Xipi lacquer art.

The rhinoceros skin lacquer can be seen as the most representative of the traditional value of the material, corresponding to the 'intrinsic value' of the material in Prown's theory of material culture. In the following section, several of Gan's representative works are listed and the combination of techniques and materials of lacquerware, as well as the different values represented by the materials are also analysed.

#### **4.3.2 Lacquerware Artwork**

In 2010, the red and gold-spotted Xipi lacquer large round box (as shown in Fig. 12) won the gold medal at the 11th Chinese Arts and Crafts Masters’ Works ‘Tian Gong Yi Yuan - Hundred Flowers Cup’ Chinese Arts and Crafts Excellence Award.

In 2011, it was permanently collected by the Palace Museum in Beijing (CNLIC, 2019). The shape is taken from a silver-gilt, rounded box from the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) emphasising its ornate and full-bodied quality (CNLIC, 2019). The rhinoceros skin lacquer is one of the most difficult painting techniques. It is made by layering various colours of lacquer, forming a pattern, smoothing, and polishing. The addition of coral and gold to the lacquer gives it a more lustrous and vivid colour.



Fig. 12 Red and gold spotted Xipi lacquer large round box (2009)

This red lacquer box (as shown in Fig. 13) was commissioned by the British Museum for the opening of this gallery in 2017. It was designed by Qiongge Jiang of SHANG XIA (established jointly by the world-famous designer Jiang and France's Hermès Group, celebrating a contemporary fine living lifestyle) and made by master Gan of Anhui Province, China, using the rhinoceros skin lacquer process (British Museum, 2017). Inside are six black lacquered compartments with inscriptions inside the lid and on the base. Traditionally, it was used to hold dried fruit on festive occasions. Gan (2017) expected to bridge the gap between the tangible and the intangible, the tradition and the present.





Fig. 13 Garden (2017)

The black and gold-spotted rhinoceros skin lacquer hexagonal vase (as shown in Fig.14) was collected by the National Museum of China in 2018. The entire vessel is delineated from the top to the bottom in five directions, signifying the five directions of peace between east, west, north, south and heaven (Gan, 2019). The bottle's mouth and base are not straight edged but cut and chamfered in the spirit of geometric proportions, and the horizontal and vertical angles are straight and full of classical sculpture and tension (Gan, 2019). To express the majesty of the six-sided vase, the author forgoes the usual combination of different colours of lacquer, and uses only black, brown and gold in repeated layers, with the texture of gold flowing like silk through the glossy black and brown layers.



Fig. 14 *Black and gold-spotted rhinoceros skin lacquer hexagonal vase (2018)*

According to the research conducted by Noriyasu Niimura (2009), the colour language and colour style of traditional lacquerware is heavily dominated by black and red (red is mainly modulated with the mineral cinnabar) as the basic colours for decorative beard painting. This colour palette has been established almost naturally since the beginning of lacquerware. This concept has some connection with the five elements of colour: the colours of fire: red, purple; the colours of earth: yellow, coffee, teal, brown; the colours of gold: white, gold, silver the colours of water; black, blue, grey and the colours of wood: green, cyan, emerald (Chen, 2014). The relationship between the five elements is as follows: Gold gives birth to water → Water gives birth to wood → Wood gives birth to fire → Fire gives birth to earth → Earth gives birth to gold (Zhang, 2010). The traditional red and black colour palette of lacquer also refers to the symbiotic coexistence of life's origins and contradictions.

The colour red is also known as the colour of the sun and corresponds to the element of Fire among the Five Elements, which also include Water, Wood, Metal, and Earth. With the sun everything can survive, while the fire can drive away wild animals to ensure life (Chen, 2014). It is because of this most instinctive need for life, that our ancestors have deep feelings and reliance on red and have always regarded red as the most auspicious colour. Furthermore, the colour characteristics of red and black have been fully exploited in the blending and use of lacquer, and their colour characteristics fully represent and reflect the tough, yet soft and glossy characteristics of natural lacquer.

Research has shown that Erke Gan's achievements are overwhelmingly positive, both in the literature and in the press. However, in my interview with Annan Wang, a young Chinese lacquer artist, he mentions that many contemporary lacquer artists of his age believe that Gan's current success is due to capitalist propaganda, such as a biographical documentary on him. They have the impression that Erke Gan only makes rhinoceros skin lacquer and that his work is too conservative and traditional, not unlike that of ancient lacquerware. But they also had to admit that when Erke Gan's work, documentaries and various reports appeared, more and more artists became interested in lacquer and began to experiment with its integration into their own artistic creations.

I also realised from talking to other young artists working with lacquer how they found that the older generation of Chinese lacquer craftsmen was completely separated from artistic aesthetics and technique. They were good at using various techniques but lacked knowledge of design. Those who designed lacquer paintings or lacquerware were separate from those who made it, which resulted in those who could really make lacquer not being able to create it. When young artists want to try to combine lacquer with artwork, they first choose to work with these older lacquer

craftsmen because they are good at the techniques, but these craftsmen cannot understand some of the innovative ideas put forward by the artists.

However, it is my belief / in my opinion, while continuing to use the traditional material of lacquer, Gan has experimented with different materials, adding to the inherent value of lacquer the additional value of the material for his own artistic aesthetic. Instead of the traditional red and black, Gan believes that the transmission of skills is not static, and in Gan's lacquer works he adds a large amount of gold to combine with red or black. These gold textures are a result of the gold leaf he applies during the production process, a technological innovation in which gold leaf and lacquer are appropriately and subtly blended. For my research, the identifying of attached value in Prown's material culture theory provides the new combination of lacquer and textile to express its new understanding of attached value when the lacquer is used as cloth. This new attached value is reflected in the choice of new materials, the use of new colours, the innovation of new techniques and the new cultural value output of lacquer as a material.

#### **4.4 Case study 3: Textile Art in an Oriental Aesthetic - Textile Artist: Guanzhen Wu**

##### **4.4.1 Creation background**

China was the first country to adopt lacquerware and lacquer art. However, the early lacquer art was mainly applied to vessels, screens, furniture and the Chinese guzheng, which fell within the scope of utensils (Sung *et al.*, 1972). In the more recent years, lacquer, as a painting material, became a separate kind of painting - lacquer painting. Guanzhen Wu is a Chinese contemporary young lacquer painting artist. As per Kejun Xia's (2021) analysis, he revitalizes lacquer painting by intertwining modernity with its inherent viscosity and transparency, using his

background in Western abstract art and innovative silken thread techniques to expand its artistic boundaries. Indeed, he did not like the lacquer painting attached to the board, because the transparent nature of the lacquer was concealed.

“When the leaves are put in the light, both sides are very transparent. Can we make the paint so light and transparent on both sides?” (Wu, 2001:7) With this idea, he began to experiment constantly on silk, acrylics and paper. Then, Wu found the solution in the combination of ramie and Chinese lacquer. Ramie is also known as Chinese grass, grass hemp, grass cloth or Chinese hemp cloth. As one of the oldest fibres in the world, ramie fibre has been cultivated for over 5,000 years (Choi & Kim, 2014). In order to test the effect of the combination of Chinese lacquer and ramie, Wu spent much time experimenting with ramie. Furthermore, he found that a thinly woven ramie fabric could increase the adhesion and resistance of Chinese lacquer, while retaining the penetrating properties of the lacquer (Wu, 2001). Eventually, he presented to people a new world of lacquer language with a strong poetic and futuristic sense by grasping the viscosity and transparency of lacquer, communicating with nature, and penetrating space via suspending and awakening.

Hui Zeng (2021), a Chinese art critic and curator, stated that one of the challenges Chinese contemporary artists faces today is how to describe the efforts of the new culture movement and how to bring these ideas into contemporary society with real value. As agreed by Canfeng Chen (2021), Wu’s art provides a good example by combining traditional techniques with modern civilization to create a new visual space. Reflected by different light sources, Guanzhen Wu’s lacquer art establishes a wonderful visual interaction with visitors through the flexible visual impressions formed by light in different time periods (CAFA, 2018). Guanzhong Wu attempts to reason out the relationship between ‘emptiness and reality’ and ‘something and

nothing' through lacquer and ramie, thus presenting oriental aesthetics in a new way via contemporary lacquer art.

Wu's lacquer artworks mark the beginning of the third phase in the development of lacquer art, leading us to reconsider the history and future of this material. Distinct from the first phase of traditional regional aesthetics and the second phase's influence of Western abstraction and mixed media exploration, Wu's works integrate the material properties of lacquer with new visual perceptions (Xia, 2021). He not only preserves the essence of lacquer but also, by rearranging perceptions, merges abstract thinking with the subtle poetry of nature, creating art that is neither fully abstract nor contemporarily vibrant. This goes beyond merely expanding lacquer art; it's a fresh exploration of its viscosity and transparency, opening a window for viewers to re-examine space and the pulsing breath of the soul.

#### **4.4.2 Exhibition**

“The thin wings of the dragonfly bear its body 100 times heavier, so ramie can also bear thousands of years of Chinese lacquer. Instead of being attached to the paint board, Chinese lacquer can be attached to the light ramie to show its beauty.” (Wu, 2018:2).

With such an artistic concept, Wu found his own artistic aesthetics. Guanzhen Wu combines the lacquer with the traditional Chinese material ramie, so that his works not only show the light translucence but also present a wonderful light and shadow effect with the help of the light. The theme of the exhibition Guanzhen Wu is named after the artist, which means observing the way of nature and the truth of life in the use of art. It is not only a profound portrayal of the artist's personal world, but also the inner spirit supporting his artistic creation (Xia, 2021).

According to the curator Hui Zeng (2021), he divided the exhibition into five parts: 'Daydream', 'The nature', 'Long Rolls of Dunhuang', 'Na Shan Project' and 'Memories through Lacquer and Threads'. The exhibition is an extension of the artist's diverse interpretations based on two materials, Chinese lacquer and ramie. Meanwhile, it reflects the young artist's spiritual journey back to the past. Zeng (2021) expected that the exhibition would allow the audiences to feel the value of traditional crafts still in the contemporary era. Similarly, Professor Lin (2009:4) found that "contemporary art needs to absorb Western culture, but it should more be rooted in the local culture and dig out the cultural roots from its own soil.". In summary, the evidence reviewed here seems to show that the traditional Chinese craftsmanship and culture play an integral role in contemporary Chinese art. However, when it comes to the value and significance of introducing the spirit of traditional culture into the creation of contemporary art, it is impossible to avoid the worldwide trend of globalisation. The development of Chinese contemporary art has been more passive because it has been heavily influenced by Western art, but this does not deny the importance of contemporary art to Chinese art, which requires us to express our own artistic language through the context of Western contemporaneity.

Lacquer art has the possibility to be more imaginative, rather than solidified and isolated (Wu, 2018). His experiments have created more possibilities and opportunities for the growth of lacquer art and its development. Guanzhen Wu respects traditional craftsmanship while insisting on innovative ways to express the conceptual artistic thinking of contemporary lacquer art, which is the authenticity embodied in Guanzhen's contemporary lacquer art (Chen, 2021). Guanzhen Wu expresses contemporary art language with lacquer and uses the combination of lacquer and ramie to present the transparent and translucent visual characteristics of Chinese lacquer, making his works show the characteristics of Chinese aesthetics in the light and shadow space.

With clear artistic thoughts about this, Guanzhen Wu (2020) looks for new materials to replace the traditional lacquer panels with something thin, hoping to adopt a new way of expression that would break the colourfulness of lacquer art and present a different visual experience. As pointed out by Lin (2019), Wu combines his works with contemporary textile art, undoubtedly providing a new way for the development of contemporary lacquer art. Meanwhile, he puts forward his own way of thinking and creating in exploring various possibilities of contemporary lacquer art creation.

### **Memory of Lacquer Thread**

Guanzhen Wu (2018) takes ramie threads coated with lacquer and puts them into the loom to make lacquer threads. When lacquer pearls are put together in series, the lacquer threads naturally droop. With a mirror on the bottom and light in all directions, the lacquer threads naturally droop. With a mirror on the bottom and light in all directions, the lacquer pearls are like a spider web with drops in waters, or a water drop under the roof after raining in the south (see Fig. 15). In *Microcosmic Nature*, - Guanzhen Wu uses small pieces of wood that were common in his childhood. These works made of wood pieces give forth an odour of lacquer and wood. It is natural materials that revive his memory of mountains, which is regarded as the aspiration of Wu's creation.





Fig. 15 *Memory of lacquer thread* (2018)

Guanzhen Wu's work is transparent and light, with a film-like quality that makes us feel it breathing. Numerous lacquered threads hang the work in mid-air, revealing through the light a permeable shadow on the far side, wrapping around the space. The use of space and light in Wu's work has been a significant influence in the creation of the artwork in my practice. As Sheila L Cavanagh and Angela Failler (2013) mention in their book *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, it is hoped that the work will place the skin at the centre of the research and thus, explore deeper or thicker issues, seeing the skin both as a cultural as well as a psychological object. I want my work to present a skin through which people can imagine, and they can see deep inside themselves.

### **Dunhuang Scroll Painting**

In early China, lacquer painting succeeded scroll painting. In Dunhuang Scroll Paintings, Guanzhong Wu applies the traditional painting technique of riding perspective to his work and partially reconstructs the Dunhuang murals. One textile student commented: “I had never imagined lacquer could feel soft, but Wu’s combination with ramie made it seem like it could move. I started to think about how other hard materials might become flexible too, depending on how we work with them” (Participant B, Interview, 2021). Both ramie and lacquer are used to mimic the flaking state of the Dunhuang frescoes (See Fig. 16). This reflects, not only the fate of Dunhuang’s frescoes but also the diversity of lacquer painting.

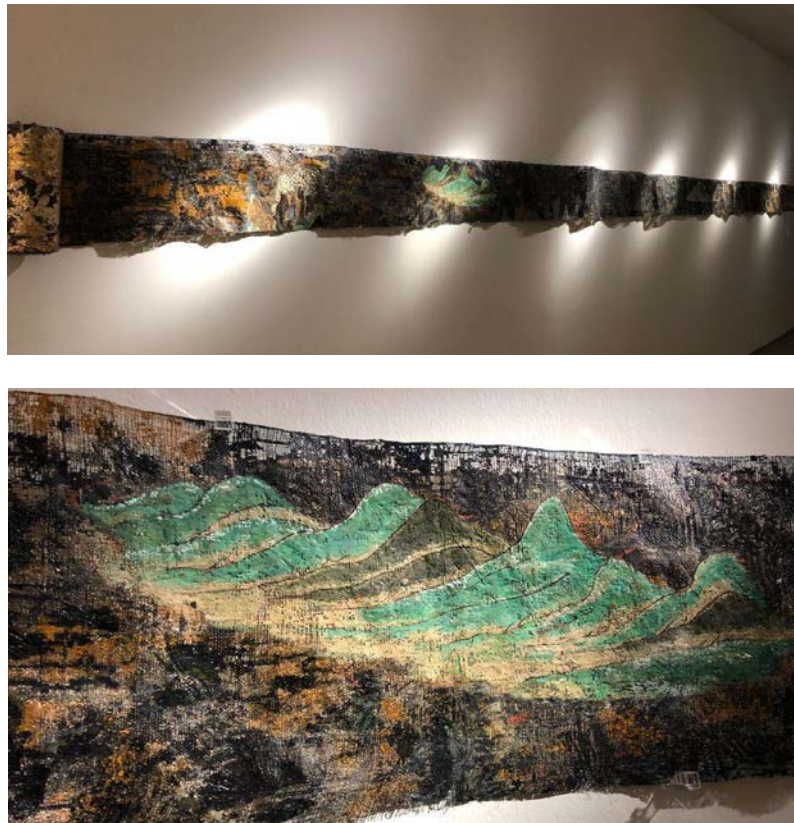


Fig. 16 *Dunhuang scroll painting* (2018)

### **Daylight Dreamworld**

According to Guanzhen Wu (2007), any memory is incomplete and fragmentary, intertwined with emotion and memory. The works in ‘Daytime Dreams’ are presented

in thin ramie, which depict flowers, grasses and mosses in the mountains. These are all memories of his childhood. Beyond that, the work is surrounded by a frame and suspended slightly against the wall. Illuminated by a spotlight, the scene is projected onto the white wall and seems to embrace you with sunlight as childhood memories blur into view (See Fig.17). Light, as an invisible material, is incorporated into lacquer and ramie. This is a prominent feature of Wu's art and his personal response to the transformation of traditional lacquer. Guanzhen Wu (2008) applies various colours of lacquer unevenly to a see-through ramie weave, thus creating a dynamic visual impression of lacquer art.



Fig. 17 *Daylight dreamworld* (2008)

Guanzhen Wu's exhibition "opens up a new way of thinking and approach to the development of contemporary lacquer art in China, as his efforts regenerate the contemporary spirit of lacquer art." (Tong, 2016:14) "While lacquer served our daily lives with its exquisite skills in ancient times, lacquer painting is now in dire need of artistic aesthetics distilled from traditional aesthetic ideas by lacquer masters to climb to the top" (Feng, 2016:18). In this exhibition, Wu offers answers to the difficult

questions: where can we find the origin and essence of lacquer painting when it is severed from lacquerware? How can lacquer painting be more beautiful as a painting art if it is equated with lacquerware? In such a dilemma, Wu presents his feasible solution in this exhibition.

As claimed by Huang (2010), authenticity is inherent in art. The reason for imposing it, is that authenticity exists, even high-quality forgeries cannot be compared to genuine art. The authenticity of art also lies in not imitating others, for once such behaviour is allowed, the artist's temperament is obscured. When we look at the work by the contemporary artist Guanzhen Wu, we are reminded that in Chinese, Guanzhen means 'to see the truth', thereby designating an appreciation of the aesthetics and authenticity of art. Wu's contemporary lacquer artworks have a vibrant creativity that represents the experimental innovation of art in this era.

Guanzhen Wu's expression of lacquer culture is characteristic of his oriental artistic ambience. In his work, lacquer runs through everything but seems to disappear, invisibly conveying to us a new understanding of the material. It can be light, fluid and unsmooth. However, in my interview with Guanzhen Wu, he mentioned that he was unsure if this seemingly invisible expression of lacquer was appropriate, as people seem to think that lacquer as a material is not necessary in the work and that it can be replaced. My personal perception is that the visible parts of Wu's work are only part of the whole, and it is the invisible parts that exert the greatest impact on the viewer. Artistic thinking is about using invisible emotions to express the tangible. Guanzhen Wu is faced with the famous proposition of how to express the contemporary language of lacquer art and how to transform traditional lacquer art into contemporary lacquer art.

In terms of method, the first WHAT is about how art can influence the aesthetics of life, reflecting the combination of contemporary art and the aesthetics of life, and allowing traditional lacquer art to enter the level of the aesthetics of life and to be able to combine with living space to form an oriental aesthetic.

The second WHAT is about that contemporaneity is an independent artistic personality which expresses the artist's freedom of mind (Wu, 2020). Art is always a future-oriented art, a constant innovation of the mind, otherwise it is against the contemporary concept (Shi, 2009). Therefore, the ability to use contemporary lacquer art to express conceptual artistic thinking while appreciating traditional lacquer art is what makes contemporary lacquer art so appealing. Instead of following the stylised expression of lacquer art, it is more about using lacquer as a vehicle to express the intangible spirit in a tangible art form.

#### **4.5 Case study 4: Lacquer Art Interpreting the Language of Western Contemporary Art - Lacquer and textile Artist: Jijun Weng**

##### **4.5.1 Creation background**

"Lacquer is a fascinating thing. It is not just a material. It will move, it will change. It has a temper. I don't think I just use it to create. Lacquer is more like a partner of mine, reaching an agreement in the constant dialogue and collision with me, and expressing what I want to say in the work together." (Weng, 2015b:84)

Jijun Weng is a lacquer and textile artist who has "inherited traditional Chinese artistic thinking" (Weng, 2004:35). However, he is influenced by the language of Western modern painting and uses "the art of lacquer to interpret the language of Western contemporary art." (Weng, 2004:37) The greatest difference between

lacquer art and other arts “lies in the specificity of the lacquer language itself.” (Weng, 2015b:84). Weng is very fond of the oxidation process of lacquer. It is this changing nature that creates the richness of lacquer expression.

According to the research conducted by Yaping Wang (2020), in Jijun’s work, the processes of experimentation and the subsequent formation of various series of works reveal that his style is different from the works of traditional lacquer art masters and artists who simply use lacquer as a medium for contemporary art. This research intends to create a contemporary textile artwork that adheres to the important characteristics of traditional lacquer art.

#### **4.5.2 Artworks**

##### **Landscape**

His series ‘Landscape’, created between 2010 and 2015, has taken on the attributes of an abstract sculpture. He cuts flat mountains into blocks and then assembles them in three-dimensional space (See Fig.18). These geometric bodies resemble mountains but have the characteristics of a spatial structure (Weng, 2015). Jijun abstracts each side of the abstract geometry in space and then collages or juxtaposes the two cut surfaces. It feels like painted rock blocks from a distance, while up close, each surface remains a delicate abstract image. His re-understanding of Chinese humanism and landscapes is also expressed.



Fig. 18 *Landscape* (2015)

### **Constellation**

The Constellation is presented with an effect similar to that of rhinoceros skin work. The effect of the texture created by the repeated sanding of layers of colour overlapping each other creates an abstract expression of Weng's unique lacquer language (see Fig.19 and Fig.20). This abstract language is different from the abstract painting on canvas in that it has the overlapping thickness of the lacquer repeatedly painted (Weng, 2014). The unique inter penetrability of the colours caused by layers of covering and polishing gives the picture a solidified effect, which shows a different visual style from the traditional rhinoceros skin lacquer technique (Wang, 2020).

Because of the concentrated nature of the material itself, even when the picture is polished to a flat surface, there is a rich layering of colours. The delicate relationship of colour is a unique reflection in Weng's work, and the beauty of the brushstroke-like texture created by his fine polishing can be experienced in all the images, regardless of different shades of lightness and hues (Weng, 2004). There is no figurative content

in these images. It is this particular visual language itself that calls out to viewers, rather than the content, thus driving viewers into the ethereal realm of lacquer art.



Fig. 19 *Constellation* (2019)



Fig. 20 *Constellation* (2017-5)

During the pandemic, Jijun began to pay more attention to people's desire to explore the unknown world. He used his works to reflect the connection between the macro and micro worlds. Weng is proficient in lacquer art, and can transform the so-called traditional patterns into the exploration of the origin of life and the depiction of the cosmic form. From different angles, he broke the people's stereotype of lacquer's emphasis on craftsmanship and decoration. His works are inspired by the traditional craft of Xipi lacquer. Weng took advantage of the seemingly symmetrical but varied characteristics of Xipi lacquer and regarded them as tiny units that construct microbial morphology. He reproduced the original form of life, as well as the various topography, geology and landforms bred from the earth as the mother body. For example, in the work *Constellation 2019-25* (see Fig.21), he used the rare purple and black and silver Xipi lacquer combined with the overall abstract symbol to create a unique visual effect like mineral crystals. According to Weng, minerals, like lacquer, are also living substances, and their shape reveals how the world is constructed.

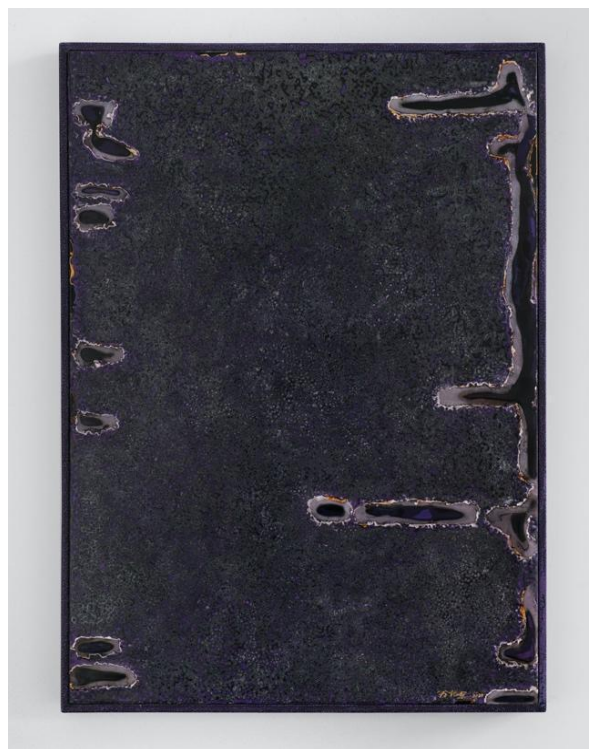


Fig. 21 *Constellation* (2019-25)

The work *Constellation 2020-21* (See Fig. 22) shows the exploration of unknown forms in the universe with an irregular near-circle shape. The dark brown picture that changes like a nebula comes from the oxidation process of the lacquer itself. It changes from milky white, blood red, and oxidised to dark brown. The subtle changes between the various dark browns are created by the artist using the differences in the lacquer from different origins, as well as the temperature, humidity and time control when drying in the shade room. The bumps of varying sizes on the artwork contain imagery ranging from gravel, mountains and hills to land and islands.



Fig. 22 *Constellation* (2020)

Contemporary Chinese textile art has been presented in more and more diversified ways. As a traditional craft, lacquer art has been used by some contemporary artists in their creations. This conversion not only evokes the value of traditional craftsmanship, but also expands contemporary art. Like Chinese traditional

calligraphy and ink painting, a traditional craft like lacquer art also has its particularity and breakthrough in a large range of contemporary art. As Weng said “contemporary lacquer painting must fully realise that in addition to the physical properties of the lacquer medium, it is more important to recognise its cultural attributes, material value and symbolic meaning.” (Weng, 2015b:84). In the creative practice, “we should feel the tolerance of lacquer and perfect our own life experience” (Sun, 2021:4). Jijun's explorations and experiments in this field are of very special value because he explored a path to contemporary lacquer art through creation. At the same time, he also provided a direction and academic discussion topic for the transformation of lacquer art from traditional to contemporary.

The expression of lacquer culture is more experimental and abstract in character with Jijun's way of incorporating western art aesthetics. His re-integration of traditional rhinoceros skin lacquer techniques has also inspired my practice work. I have been applying the new form of rhinoceros skin lacquer technique to my Lacquer as Cloth themed artwork in my practice. As Participant C described, “Weng's work surprised me. It felt Western at first. The structure, the spatial openness, even the colour palette. But then I noticed how the lacquer surface held something more meditative and restrained. It told a Chinese story in a Western accent!” (C2022). Contemporary Chinese artists have been experimenting with and promoting the idea of fusing Eastern and Western art and artistic methods, starting with the most basic combination of abstract symbols and colour. However, each artist has their own understanding of Western forms of artistic expression and their own approach to the fusion of East and West. The passage of time and the change of space occur in parallel on the same plane, intertwined. The aim of the combination of the two is to better situate the artwork within a more international artistic aesthetic.

## 4.6 Chapter Conclusion

The chapter discusses contemporary Chinese textile art through four case studies and analyses the different ways in which lacquer cultural values are expressed in contemporary Chinese textile art through three different artists. 'From Lausanne to Beijing' International Fibre Art Biennale has played a crucial role in the development of contemporary textile art in China, gradually establishing that Chinese textile art is influenced by diverse cultures and that the concept of creating artworks is constantly expressing new aspects. On the platform of international fibre art exhibitions, Chinese artists began to learn how to dialectically examine their own creative concepts and material values, seeking more unique and self-expressive forms of artistic expression. The question of whether to preserve the purity of one's own artistic language or to retain traditional cultural values and continue to apply them in one's own creations is always a question for contemporary Chinese textile artists to consider.

The chapter analyses three artists who have a different understanding of lacquer. Erke Gan is more interested in the traditional value of lacquer, and this respect is reflected in his continuation and development of the technique of rhinoceros skin lacquer. At the same time, the main colours of his lacquer work remain the most representative black and red, with the addition of new materials and the incorporation of gold. This is an expression of his additional value to lacquer as a material, which, as mentioned above, is reflected in the integration of new materials, the innovation of traditional techniques and the risk of subverting traditional colours. This also lays the foundation for the choice of lacquer colours in my practice section, where the idea of the five elements and their corresponding colours will be redefined in my practice work.

Guanzhen Wu's oriental aesthetic thinking on the language of lacquer expresses his conceptual artistic thinking with contemporary lacquer. Lacquer has become a personal symbol for him, and the importance of tradition and technique is diminished. His work is not confined to the traditional lacquer object, but rather explores the combination and interaction of the work with light and space. It demonstrates the self-cultural identity of lacquer, symbolising the Self, as well as being a cultural and psychological object.

This chapter also analysed Jiju Weng's work to explore more critically the cultural attributes, material values and symbolic meanings beyond the physical properties of lacquer. Weng's expression of the cultural attributes of lacquer is broader and more inclusive, allowing lacquer culture to be not only confined to the East, but it can also take on the characteristics of Western art. In my practice, when lacquer is used as a cloth, it presents to the outside world a new multicultural approach to the art of rhinoceros skin lacquer, which is no longer simply an expression of self-identity. His contemporary re-expression of traditional rhinoceros skin lacquer has also influenced my new understanding of this technique. This research confronts the fact that I as an artist have indeed been influenced by the Western art system. But it also explores a balance between the combination of East and West in my artistic production to increase the diversity of lacquer culture.

Erke Gan's refinement of traditional lacquer techniques, Guanzhen Wu's expression of the strong, soft and restrained oriental culture unique to the material and Jiju Weng's innovation of diverse lacquer cultures have all contributed to this research. The study treats lacquer as a vehicle, as skin/cloth, and also expresses the new language of lacquer as a vehicle to express a new language of lacquer in contemporary Chinese textile art. The study's treatment of lacquer as skin/cloth is referred to as a new culture value that I have given to lacquer. The cultural value of

lacquer is integrated into textile art and placed in the context of contemporary art. The material or material value of lacquer is not confined to the continuation of a single tradition, but through this research is unveiled as a new value given to it by the research. These new values also express different symbolic meanings, symbolising self-identity and the affirmation of the value of an almost abandoned culture. Furthermore, lacquer serves as a material that not only reflects its inherent value but also allows for exploration of its potential and identity during the creative process.

The concept of my practice work is lacquer as skin/cloth. When lacquer is seen as skin, I want it to be light and translucent as well. As Cavanagh and Failler (2013) mention in their book *Skin, Culture and Psychoanalysis*, it is hoped that the work will place the skin at the centre of the research and thus explore deeper or thicker issues, seeing the skin as a cultural object and a psychological object. I want my work to present a skin through which people can imagine, and they can see themselves deep inside. Weng Jieju's expression of lacquer culture is more experimental and abstract in character with his way of incorporating western art aesthetics. I have been applying the rhinoceros skin lacquer technique to my Lacquer as Cloth themed artwork in my practice.

## **Chapter 5. Lacquer as a Skin/cloth Textile Art Collection**

### **5.1 Chapter Introduction**

In this chapter, we delve into the exploration of lacquer as a material that transcends its traditional boundaries, embracing the dual roles of 'skin' and 'cloth' within the realm of contemporary textile art. This study positions itself at the confluence of tradition and innovation, seeking to redefine the language of 'contemporary' lacquer

through a novel application in textile art. Drawing upon Prown's theory of material culture as a foundational framework, this research navigates the historical, cultural, and technical dimensions of lacquer, aiming to illuminate its multifaceted significance in the context of modern artistic practice and cultural identity.

By meticulously documenting the conditions, materials, techniques, and equipment employed throughout the experimental phase, this investigation adopts a methodical approach to exploring new practical techniques within traditional Chinese lacquer art. The primary focus is on the experimental juxtaposition of lacquer with textile materials, testing the boundaries of its application and expression. This methodological rigor ensures a comprehensive exploration of lacquer's potential, guiding the reader through a detailed examination of its transformative journey from a conventional coating to a dynamic medium of cultural expression.

Central to this study is the innovative concept of 'lacquer as a skin/cloth,' a metaphorical exploration that challenges conventional perceptions and opens up new avenues for understanding materiality in art. This research not only contributes to the academic discourse on material culture and contemporary art but also signifies a pivotal moment for re-evaluating the role of traditional materials in the face of evolving artistic and cultural narratives. It highlights the urgency of this re-evaluation within the current global context, where the interplay between tradition and modernity, identity and materiality, becomes increasingly complex and significant.

The implications of this study extend beyond the academic sphere, offering insights and inspirations for artists, curators, and cultural theorists alike. It invites a re-examination of the ways in which materials can narrate the intricacies of human experience and cultural heritage, urging a broader consideration of how traditional techniques can be revitalized and recontextualized within contemporary art practices.

In conclusion, this chapter presents a compelling argument for the redefinition and revitalization of lacquer in contemporary textile art, advocating for a deeper engagement with traditional materials as a means of exploring and expressing contemporary cultural identities. Through this exploration, the study not only enriches the academic and artistic discourse on material culture but also poses new questions and challenges, paving the way for future innovations in the field. This research, therefore, stands as a testament to the enduring relevance and adaptability of traditional art forms, highlighting their potential to contribute to the ongoing dialogue between the past and the present, the personal and the collective, the material and the metaphorical.

## **5.2 Lacquer as a skin/cloth art collection**

### **5.2.1 Palingenesis**

“Forgetfulness of your real nature is true death; remembrance of it is rebirth.” (Ramana Maharshi, 1985:108).

According to Sri Ramana Maharshi, a highly esteemed spiritual master in India, understanding and embracing one's true self is the essence of enlightenment. The traditional Chinese art of lacquer has gradually fallen into oblivion and lacquer is no longer an art known and understood by all (Schilling, Khanjian & Chang, 2014). According to Chinese contemporary artist Professor Jiehong Jiang (2018), its historical and cultural value is no longer affirmed by most contemporary artists, and people seem to be in search of something new. However, cultural traditions have been a mine of particular energy, an energy that empowers a kind of ‘uniqueness’ for art production.

We are still in the process of exploring this new thing, and we are unable to define the 'new' at the same time. In the context of globalisation, this strategy of focusing on traditional culture is crucial for contemporary Chinese art to challenge westernised knowledge and existing models in everyday life (Jiang, 2007). This study reapplies the traditional art of lacquer to contemporary textile art, bringing it back into the contemporary context.

This research explores how the traditional art of lacquer, when reintroduced into contemporary textile art, offers a new perspective and application, particularly emphasising Chinese cultural identity. This process not only rejuvenates a nearly forgotten art form but also symbolises a form of rebirth, aligning with the principles of Palingenesis. As part of my initial series, Palingenesis, this approach champions the resurgence of Chinese lacquer art as a metaphorical rebirth, mirroring the process of transitioning from oblivion back to recognition and fostering the innovation of a contemporary lacquer vernacular.

Moreover, incorporating the philosophical teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi into this exploration underscores the transformative power of remembering and reviving traditional practices. Maharshi posits that awareness of one's true nature is akin to a rebirth (Ramana Maharshi, 1985). Therefore, this research not only salvages lacquer art from the brink of extinction but also reinterprets it, imbuing it with fresh cultural and existential significance. Through this revival, the study embodies Maharshi's ideology, asserting that enlightenment and the resurgence of traditions like lacquer art stem from the acknowledgement and acceptance of our authentic selves and heritage.

The study treats lacquer as skin, a form of self-identification and affirmation. The process by which lacquer is nurtured as skin is the process of rebirth that will

eventually leave its mark on the surface. During pregnancy, the mother's abdomen skin stretches resulting in the damage or breakage of the elastic and collagen fibres in the skin which causes narrow, streak-like, wavy lines of varying width and length (Christian Diehl, 2021). Ellen Scott (2018), an artist who reprograms parts of our bodies that are usually hidden as parts unworthy of praise, holds the view that the bodies we see in artwork tend to be smooth and pristine. However, people, especially women, are still taught that stretch marks are a sign of a flaw or failure and are encouraged to cover them up (Scott, 2018). The concept of Scott's work, that we hide what is not considered to be perfect, resonances with the ideas discussed in my interview with the contemporary lacquer artist Qi Chen (2021). She mentioned that lacquer, a traditional Chinese craft, seems somewhat alien to contemporary youth, becoming an almost abandoned tradition and a dying craft, overshadowed by contemporary art (Chen, 2021). In this first series of my work, Chinese textile art can be perceived as the mother, and the process of gestation of new life is the development of contemporary textile art, which is also the process of the rebirth of traditional Chinese lacquer art. Thus, this process of rebirth is bound to leave its mark on the skin.

The first series, Palingenesis, I have captured the stretch marks of five mothers and asks permission to use their photographs anonymously. They all record the sign of the strength and power that birthing a new life requires. I have adapted the colour of these photographs to black and white (as shown in Fig. 23), regardless of skin colour or age, in an attempt to focus solely on these life-giving lines.



Fig. 23 *Five women with stretch marks on their abdomen (2021)*

As one of the participants shared in my interview, “I used to cover my stretch marks because they reminded me of what I lost—my body, control, even confidence. They made me feel broken. But later I realised they were not just scars. They marked the moment I became a mother. They are the only visible memory on my body of the life I brought into the world.” (Participant D, Interview, 2021). Stretch marks, as direct physiological manifestations of the natural process of nurturing life, can be understood as an inevitable part of an individual's life journey. The acceptance of stretch marks exemplifies Maharshi's encouragement of self-acceptance and exploration of one's true nature, where individuals essentially embrace their authentic journey and identity. This marks a process of self-awareness and awakening, aligning with Maharshi's (1985) teachings that true knowledge is an inner awakening to your own true nature. Lacquer, as a traditional material, carries profound symbolic significance within Chinese culture. Viewing lacquer as skin/cloth not only highlights its physical properties of protection and enclosure but also symbolises a deeper level

of cultural material value protection. This extends beyond merely conserving traditions to affirming and reshaping individual and cultural identities.

Utilising lacquer in contemporary textile art signifies integrating this deep cultural safeguard and spiritual connection into modern textile artistic practices for self and cultural exploration and expression. The display and valorisation of stretch marks in lacquer artwork prompt us to reflect on how individuals can explore and understand their inner essence through bodily changes. Stretch marks, as symbols of rebirth, signify the transition from pregnancy to childbirth—not only the birth of new life but also the rebirth of a woman's identity as a mother. This concept resonates with Maharshi's notion that remembering your true essence equates to rebirth, underscoring that "Forgetfulness of your real nature is true death; remembrance of it is rebirth" (Maharshi, 1985:101). Thus, stretch marks transcend their physical manifestation, forging a profound connection between personal narratives and the wider narrative of Chinese cultural identity. This interplay illuminates the manner in which personal experiences, such as those symbolised by stretch marks, are interwoven with and find meaningful expression through the traditional lacquer art of cultural heritage and the dynamism of Chinese contemporary textile artistic innovation.

### **5.2.2 The tail end of time**

The Tail End of Time series drawing from the insightful reflections of Margot Louise Stedman, an acclaimed author, the notion that each conclusion heralds the inception of a new chapter is eloquently captured in her words: "Every end is the beginning of something else" (Stedman, 2013:348). The process that precedes the rebirth of life is also the process that is coming to an end, but it can also be the beginning of rebirth.

The so-called pre-rebirth phase of traditional Chinese lacquer art can also be seen as the 'end' of this process, that is, the present moment. The first 7,000-year-old lacquer wooden bowl was unearthed at the Hemudu site in Zhejiang in 1978, and there is evidence that lacquer trees were cultivated in Japan 12,600 years ago (Feng, 2016). If lacquerware has an age, it is over 7,000 years old.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1882) explored the concept of Eternal Recurrence, a philosophical idea that suggests all events in the universe are destined to repeat infinitely. In his work *The Gay Science*, where he stated, "The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" (Nietzsche, 1882:341). From the moment lacquer appeared to the present, using 'now' as a time node, it can be considered the second half of its entire development. This final stage seems to be coming to an end as we try to wake it up and we look forward to a new rebirth of lacquerware. Nevertheless, this 'end' signifies neither total oblivion nor cessation; indeed, it merits documentation, contemplation, and memory. The research delves into the second series of lacquer as akin to skin/cloth, depicting the final phase of our 'skin' as it evolves over time, culminating in *The Tail End of Time - Wrinkles*.

Wrinkles are a natural part of growing older, and they affect everyone (Yvette Brazier, 2020). As people age, their skin becomes thinner, drier, and less elastic, which means it is less able to protect itself from damage. This leads to wrinkles, creases, and lines on the skin. Facial expressions, such as smiling, frowning, or squinting, can lead to fine lines and wrinkles at a young age (P.W. Wertz, 2013). As we age, these lines deepen. My mother loved to laugh, so she had a lot of wrinkles around her eyes. I once wrote a poem for my mother who was sad because of the ageing of her skin:

*The wrinkles came to me and said:*

*"If you laugh, I will stay by your mouth, if you cry, I will lie by your eyes."*

*On a whim, I decided to outsmart Wrinkles.*

*"I will neither laugh nor cry," I said to Wrinkles, "I will do nothing, and see what you do."*

*Yet I could not stop thinking.*

*As a result, while I was thinking, the wrinkles crept up to my forehead; then they appeared next to my eyes and at the corners of my mouth; for while I was thinking, I was both crying and laughing.*

After reading the poem, my mother said when I look at my own wrinkles, all I see is ageing. But when I read your poem, I saw what you see—care, experience, and warmth. It made me wonder if maybe I've been wrong about them. We live in an age where we are bombarded with unrealistic images of young, perfect models (Elisabeth Fallon & Heather Hausenblas, 2005). Unfortunately, this pressure leads many women to feel self-conscious and inferior about their wrinkles - with some resorting to drastic surgical measures to try and turn back the clock. As one female participant in her 60s said, "Every advertisement tells you that ageing is a problem. Sometimes I catch myself wishing I looked younger. But I also know these lines on my face came from raising children, working hard, living fully (Participant M, Interview, 2022). It is hard to forget that." Yet Watts (2018) suggests that instead of using the opinions of others to guide your view of yourself, you must first be able to love yourself and accept any perceived flaws unconditionally.

This flaw, as it is called, is brought about by time, is unchangeable, and is a flaw defined by various objective factors. Like lacquer, it has been given the labels of old, outdated, and uninteresting. This study presents a perspective on self-identity, accepting the wrinkles, accepting the process of ageing, and learning to self-identify and appreciate. The second series of the study describe the final process when using

lacquer as skin/cloth describe the wrinkles around the eyes. Accepting these wrinkles and considering them as evidence of time - a signpost of the journey - and looking forward to the moment of what is still to come, rebirth.

The second series capture my mom around her eyes, the first with her smiling (as shown in Fig. 24), and the second with her eyes when she is sad (as shown in Fig. 25). When we laugh, the wrinkles seem to be more visible, and the marks are deeper. Similarly, when we look at this traditional lacquer craft, which is fading into oblivion, with a similarly positive mindset, does its presence instead become stronger?



Fig. 24 *When you smile* (2021)



Fig. 25 *When you are sad* (2021)

By integrating the natural formation of wrinkles with Stedman's (2012) perspective of every end is the beginning of something else and Nietzsche's (1882) concept of Eternal Recurrence and, a profound understanding of self-awareness and the cyclical nature of life is achieved. This understanding not only encourages the acceptance of ageing as an inevitable part of life but also motivates the recognition of new beginnings within every conclusion. Within this framework, the reapplication of traditional Chinese lacquer serves as a perfect metaphor, illustrating the transformation of an ending into the inception of modern innovation. Similar to wrinkles, the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional lacquer art reflects the passage of time and the accumulation of experiences, while also symbolising cultural regeneration and a deepening of self-awareness. This reinterpretation and application of traditional lacquer not only preserve its aesthetic and craftsmanship but also rediscover its profound cultural significance, thereby offering a new perspective for exploring personal and cultural identity. Such a process underscores the continuity between individuals in the nexus of tradition and modernity, ending and beginning, inspiring the location of one's place in an ever-evolving world.

### **5.3 Lacquer as a skin – Who I am**

#### **5.3.1 The definition of lacquer as a skin – Who I am**

Didier Anzieu, a French psychoanalyst, who regarded the skin not only as the surface of the body but also as the surface of the mind, held that “consciousness appears at the surface of the psychical apparatus; better still, it is that surface” (Anzieu, 1989:85). This view is supported by Claudia Benthien, a German literary scholar, who stated that the skin is a synonym, representing the self and what is inside, as well as other body parts. In her view, skin is “the place where identity is formed and assigned” (Benthien, 2002:6). Similarly, Anzieu believes that identity is based on skin, “to be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one’s own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations” (Anzieu, 1989:51). However, Benthien also focused on “cultural constructivism” in the skin and argued sensibly that “it is essential to avoid reducing the skin from the thread of a projection surface and the signs.” (Benthien, 2002:7).

Steven Connor (2002), a British literary scholar, mentioned that skin has always existed, but it has never received as much attention as it does today. Ashley Montagu, an American-British anthropologist, proposed that the psychosomatic approach to the study of the skin could be seen as centrifugal; that is, it extends outwards from the mind to the skin and recommends the opposite approach, that is, “from the skin to the mind; in other words, the centripetal approach” (Ashley Montagu, 1986:19). However, the skin does not produce the self in only one way. It also fulfils an extremely broad and diverse range of functions in relation to the body and the self.

Anzieu distinguishes nine functions of the skin, among which he mentions the “Signifying of skin” (Anzieu, 1989:105). He believes that skin travellers record tactile traces. However, the sense of touch in this study can be understood more broadly as everything given to it by the outside world, such as time and environment. He also refers to the skin self as the original parchment, preserving the first outlines of the original pre-linguistic writing that was made up of these traces on the skin, erased and written over. Just like the skin, lacquer first is a symbol. In addition, people have been trying to assign different values to lacquer. For example, it represents the diversity of lacquer art material expression, the contingency of artistic language and the depth of cultural tradition (Xiang, 2019).

However, Sylvia Plath’s (1981) poem ‘Face Lift’ declared how surgery radically changes appearance and age, resulting in confusion over time, body, skin and identity by saying that “skin doesn’t have roots, it peels away easily as paper”. Roots voice constancy and past experience. Is she the same person after the operation? Is it really that easy to fundamentally change our identities, our bodies and skin? (Poetry Shark, 2015). Based on the protective and antiseptic properties of lacquer, it is often called the most primitive skin when it is widely used on the surface of objects. However, it might be argued that the world under the skin has not really disappeared, it is just hidden. Thus, I am still me.

Anthropologist Nina Jablonski suggests that the skin as our “face to the world” (Jablonski, 2006:7) in the evolutionary history of skin. According to Anzieu, the skin ego “underlies the very possibility of thought” (Anzieu, 1989:41). According to professor of literary and cultural theory Dirk Vanderbeke and literary scholar Caroline Rosenthal, their work *Probing the Skin: Cultural Representations of Our Contact Zone* deeply examines the complexity of skin as both a cultural symbol and sensory organ (2015). The book emphasizes the ambiguous potential of skin as an object of

cultural exploration. It is portrayed as both an organ and a surface, a boundary and a cloak, concealing and revealing, isolating us from the world while also connecting us to our surroundings (Vanderbeke & Rosenthal, 2015). By applying lacquer as the first layer of skin to textile art, this study is exploring the contemporary identity of Chinese textile art and redefining the contemporary lacquer language. Skin in this research symbolizes identity, both individual and cultural. When lacquer is applied to textiles, it can be seen as a metaphorical 'coating' of one's identity, suggesting that identity can be protected, altered, or revealed through external layers, just like the application of lacquer modifies the appearance and texture of the 'cloth'. Apparently, when the lacquer acts as the first layer of skin, it also becomes the second layer of skin (i.e., its 'cloth'), which, between the body and the world, is the most important face. As the second skin suggests, "since the body is always a clothed body, the lived ego is always already a clothed ego. To speak of skins and egos, then, is to speak of, on and through clothing." (Stella North, 2013:64).

Connor (2002) in his paper *A Skin That Walks* argues that the skin is not part of the body, not because it is separate from the body, but because it cannot be separated from the body. The skin always carries the body, and it can be seen as the face of the body. The body stripped of its skin is faceless and invisible. The reason why the skin is not considered part of the body depends on the fact that, despite its unique and exclusive functions, its primary function is to express the complex, cooperative, segmented wholeness of the body (Connor, 2002). The study can consider the body as contemporary Chinese textile art and the lacquer as its skin, but this does not narrowly limit the diversity of the various types of skin. It is simply that the study sees lacquer as its skin, and lacquer can be seen as a heritage of traditional Chinese culture. A body without skin is not visible, and this body is also insignificant. Lacquer, as skin, represents the true self, Who I am.

### **5.3.2 Lacquer as a skin: intrinsic value**

In this study, the application of lacquer as a skin not only reiterates its importance as a traditional art form but also highlights its inherent value as a material, resonating with Prown's theory of material culture. Prown (1982) emphasised the importance of understanding objects not just through their utilitarian function but also through their physical properties and the meanings attributed to them by societies over time (Prown, 1982, pp.1-9). Lacquer, with its durability, sheen, and protective qualities, exemplifies this approach. Its physical characteristics not only serve practical purposes but also carry profound cultural and artistic connotations, making it an ideal medium for expressing both personal and collective identities.

The intrinsic value of lacquer is multifaceted, rooted in its material functionality and aesthetic appeal. The material's protective nature reflects its historical use in safeguarding artefacts and artworks, a quality that transcends mere functionality to symbolise a guardianship over cultural heritage. This aligns with Prown's assertion that the physical examination of objects can reveal underlying cultural attitudes and values (Prown, 1982, p. 5). Essentially, lacquer as a skin encapsulates a dialogue between its physical attributes and the layers of meaning imbued over centuries of use, underscoring the depth of its inherent value.

By integrating traditional lacquer techniques within contemporary textile art, this study not only explores but also redefines the narratives of identity through the material's enduring function, aesthetic and cultural significance. This approach goes beyond merely transforming the material substance; it leverages lacquer's traditional properties to delve into the evolving discourse of cultural identity and individual self-expression. Such a synthesis underscores lacquer's role not just as a medium of artistic expression, but as a profound connector that bridges the past and present,

weaving individual experiences and collective memory into the textile of contemporary art. In doing so, lacquer transcends its physical form to become a vessel for exploring and visualising the dynamic interplay between the internal self and the external world. It showcases the adaptability of traditional art forms in modern contexts, highlighting the continuity and diversity of identity exploration. In this research, lacquer serves not only as a material but also as an emblematic space where stories of identity, memory, and experience are intricately interwoven, echoing Prown's notion that "...object itself always has meaning..." (Prown, 1982:6) within the material culture. This unified narrative illuminates the rich and profound connections between lacquer art and the ongoing quest for self-identity in the realm of Chinese contemporary textile art.

### **5.3.3 Lacquer as a skin: Palingenesis & The tail end of time**

In the exploration of Lacquer as a Skin: Palingenesis & The Tail End of Time, the principal concept focuses on skin as a metaphorical projection surface. This not only reflects the external world's impact on the individual but also mirrors the individual's deep reflection on who I am." Through this metaphor, skin becomes a medium to discuss identity, emotions, and cultural values, allowing lacquer art to transcend its material boundaries to become a profound tool for identity and self-exploration. This perspective of viewing skin as a projection surface emphasises how complex interactions between the individual and the external world shape our identity and self-perception.

In these series, the core discussion shifts towards exploring the complexity of individual identity through the application of traditional lacquer art techniques within the context of contemporary textile art. This transition not only showcases the

modern adaptation and innovation of lacquer art but also deepens the understanding of how individual and collective identities are constructed and interpreted at the juncture of tradition and modernity.

In the Palingenesis series, the stretch marks on a pregnant woman's abdomen serve not only as natural markers of life's inception but also symbolise the transformation and evolution of individual life experiences and identity. Drawing on the concept of projection, the creative process in the Lacquer as a Skin: Palingenesis series references a photographic work of five women with stretch marks on their abdomen (2010) to depict the stretch marks on a pregnant woman's belly (as shown in Fig. 26). Similarly, in the Lacquer as a Skin: The Tail End of Time series, the focus is on an elderly woman, her eyes framed by wrinkles (as shown in Fig. 27), expressing the influence of experience and time on individual identity. By bringing these markers of life's 'final stages' to the fore, we are reminded that identity is an ever-evolving process, where an end is also the beginning of something new.



Fig. 26 *Lacquer as a skin: Palingenesis* (2022)

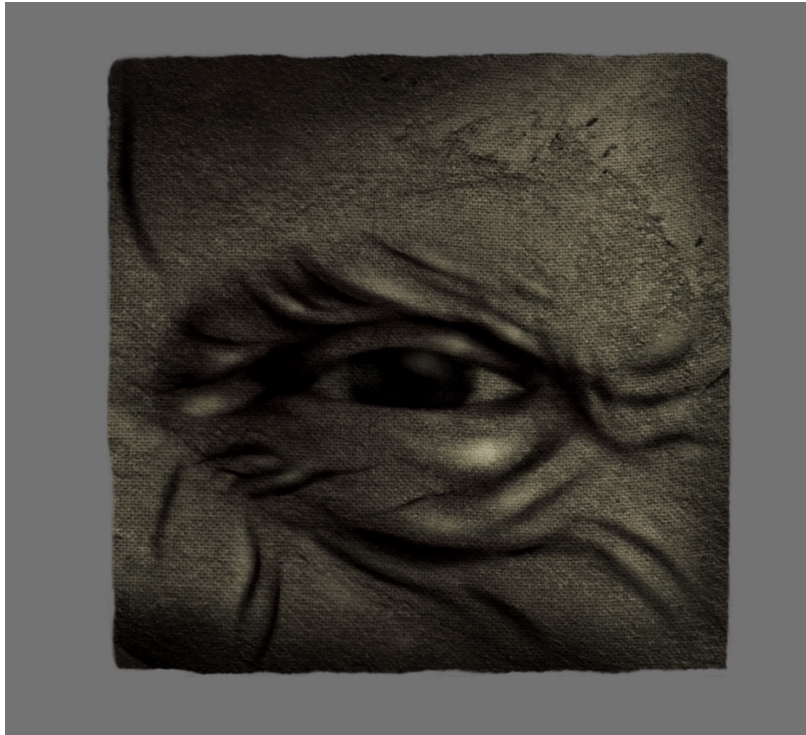


Fig. 27 *Lacquer as a skin: The tail end of time* (2022)

In the artistic exploration of *Lacquer as a Skin: Palingenesis & The Tail End of Time*, semi-sized Xuan paper is selected as the canvas, an intermediary material that embodies the ephemeral qualities of skin. Semi-sized Xuan paper, known for its semi-translucency and coarse fibres, is crafted from the bark of the *Broussonetia papyrifera* (paper mulberry tree), symbolising the porous boundary between the self and the external world. This paper's translucency is pivotal, as it mirrors the skin's role as a permeable layer, allowing the interplay of light and shadow to metaphorically reveal the complexities of identity and experience lying beneath the surface.

The choice of this particular paper resonates with Sylvia Plath's observation that "skin has no roots, it peels away easy as paper," (1965:78) underscoring the transient yet profound connection between skin and identity. It is regarded as the

primordial state of lacquer as skin, signifying the transition of the inner self to an external representation, aimed at reflecting the material's original value.



Fig.28 *Semi-sized Xuan paper* (2022)

Utilising lacquer painting techniques, lines mimicking the traces found on skin are depicted on the paper (as shown in Fig. 28 and Fig. 29). This act of painting is further enhanced by projecting images from Fig. 26 and Fig. 27 onto the semi-sized Xuan paper, creating a dynamic dialogue between traditional lacquer art and contemporary narratives of identity. This innovative approach not only challenges conventional perceptions of materiality but also delves into the fluidity of identity as influenced by both internal dispositions and external interactions.

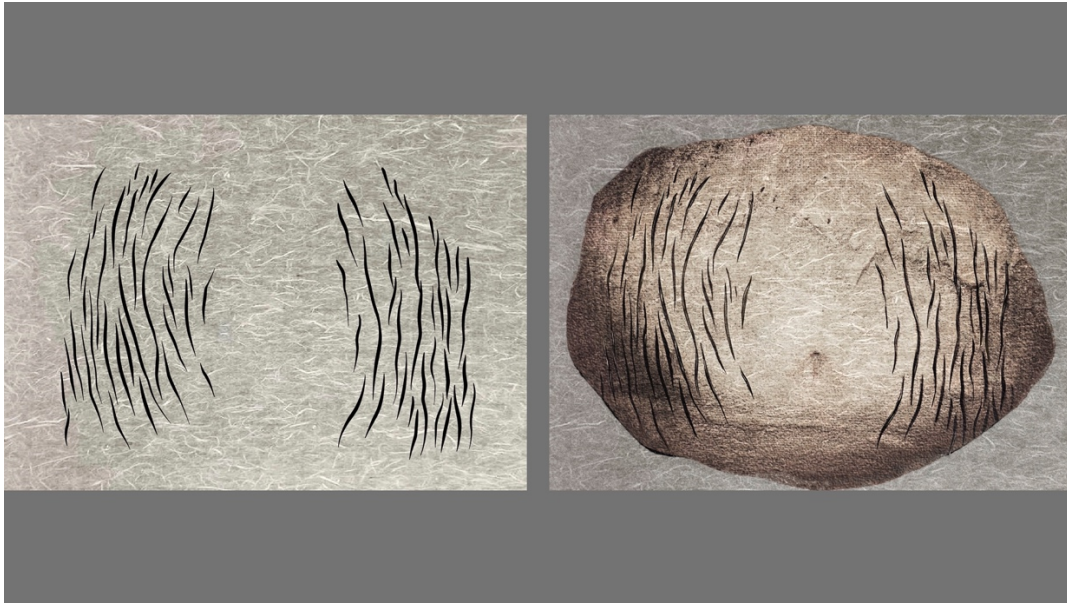


Fig. 29 *Lacquer as a skin: The tail end of time* (2022)

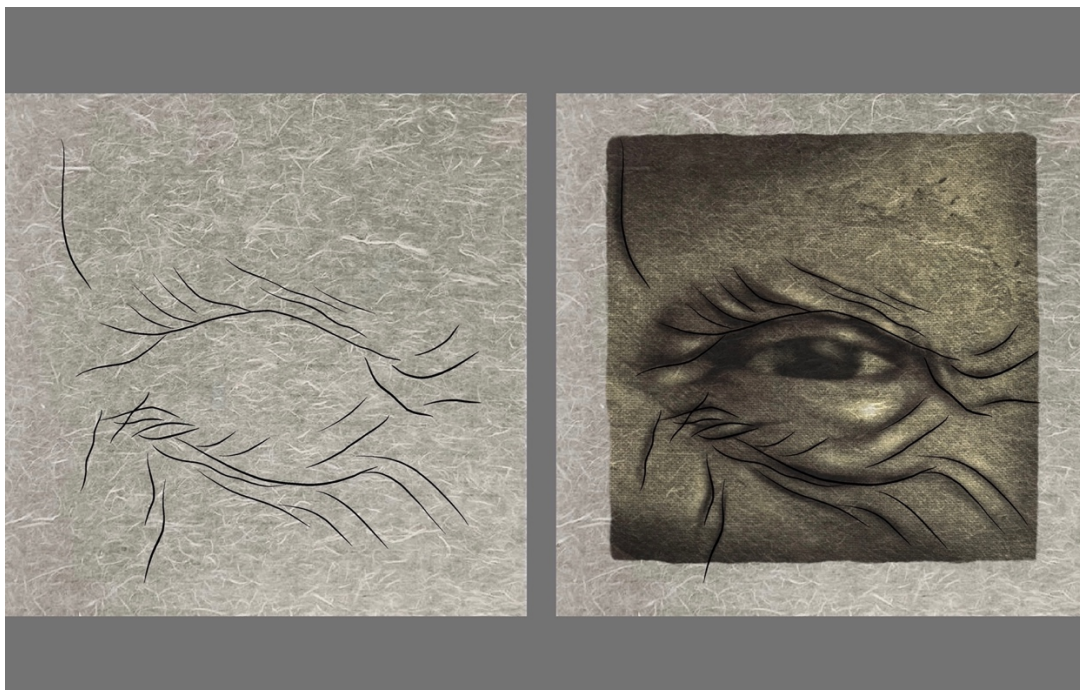


Fig. 30 *Lacquer as a skin: The tail end of time* (2022)

## **5.4 Lacquer as a cloth – Who I want to be**

### **5.4.1 The definition of lacquer as a cloth – Who I want to be**

Lacquer as the cloth, can also be perceived as the second skin of the body.

According to Connor (2002), going beyond us can be seen as a second attribute of skin, our skin transcends our body, “it is the means of our self-undoing and outgoing.” (Connor, 20021). Just like skin, the cloth is ambivalent, ambiguous and twofold: “both permeable and impermeable, superficial and profound, truthful and misleading” (Anzieu, 1989:17). Evidently, lacquer as the cloth, is just like skin, which is a framework for experiencing and a surface on which we connect with the world. Cloth, as the most touchable surface, is always in contact with the skin and the body. Thus, “being an external surface turned outward towards the gaze of the viewer, while remaining forever proximate” (Benthian, 2002). It might be argued that when the lacquer as the skin is covered with the second layer of lacquer as the clothing, the clothing turns into the boundary between the inside and the outside. As mentioned above, the lacquer as the skin becomes the hub between two entities, while the lacquer as the clothing turns into the further hub between the body and the world.

In a study conducted by Stella North (2003), she divided clothing ego from skin ego (self-composed of skin), which is another kind of self-skin. The cloth, like the skin, is the “psychical surface” (Anzieu, 1989:103). “Yet, as a skin we can choose, clothing can disguise, or reinvent, as well as reveal” (Anzieu, 1989:104). Therefore, clothing can also be considered as a kind of renewable and replaceable skin, which has a positive, rather than a passive, relationship with the time (North, 2013:82). This is also supported by North, “Inescapably visible, insistent material is the ongoing revision of the body” (North, 2013:82). This evidence indicates that it is not only a process of revising, but also a process to see again. Re-vision, places the body in the

immediacy of the world which conducts the continuous re-understanding of the body, and this body can be seen as the contemporary Chinese textile art.

Stella North proposes the surfacing of the self: the clothing ego, and the “concept of the ‘clothing ego’ to capture the use of clothing as an experiential, and supplementary skin” (North, 2013:73). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1980) observes that the ambiguous materiality of clothing responds to the materiality of the body, and that clothing shares the entangled materiality of the body and the world. This intertwining is in fact a quality of the flesh itself, as the body is always surrounded by the material world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). These insights provide a new understanding of clothing not merely as an item of ‘daily wear’ but as a profound medium for individual identity and self-expression, highlighting the complex relationship between clothing and skin in terms of experience and symbolism.

#### **5.4.2 Lacquer as a cloth: attached value**

In revisiting the exploration of lacquer within contemporary Chinese textile art, this analysis distinguishes between the material's inherent value and its additional, or attached, values, aligning closely with Prown's material culture theory. While the inherent value of lacquer is deeply rooted in its durability, aesthetic appeal, and protective nature, which symbolizes guardianship over cultural heritage and embodies a deep-seated dialogue between materiality and meaning, the study further extends to elucidate the attached values lacquer accrues in the context of contemporary art and identity narration.

The attached values of lacquer, distinct from its inherent qualities, underscore its capacity to function as a dynamic medium for personal and cultural expression.

Firstly, The Value of Emotional Depth highlights lacquer's unique ability to convey deep-seated emotions and personal narratives, amplified when conceptualised as a 'cloth' or second skin. This use of lacquer transcends traditional boundaries, allowing artists to embed complex emotional landscapes within their works, thereby facilitating a deeper engagement with audiences and enriching the tapestry of material culture with nuanced human experiences.

Secondly, The Value of Identity Exploration delves into lacquer's potency as a medium for articulating multifaceted identities. This study posits lacquer as a symbol of identity's fluidity, wrapped and revealed through the metaphorical 'cloth' it represents. This perspective broadens the scope of lacquer beyond its materiality, enabling a rich exploration of self and collective belonging, thus offering new avenues for understanding and expressing identity within the evolving discourse of contemporary art.

Thirdly, The Value of Cultural Dialogue and Heritage reflects on lacquer's role in facilitating cross-cultural exchange and preserving intangible cultural heritages. By fostering a dialogue between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary artistic practices, lacquer emerges as a medium that not only protects but also transmits cultural values, bridging past and present and inviting innovation within tradition.

These attached values—emotional depth, identity exploration, and cultural dialogue—constitute this study's original contribution, expanding upon the foundational understanding of lacquer's inherent value. By differentiating between inherent and attached values, this analysis not only aligns with but also enriches Prown's theoretical framework, offering nuanced insights into lacquer's evolving significance in contemporary textile art. This approach underscores lacquer's multifaceted role as a conduit for deep emotional expression, a tool for exploring

identity, and a bridge for cultural exchange, thereby illuminating its profound connections with the ongoing quest for self-identity and cultural continuity in the realm of Chinese contemporary textile art. Through this lens, lacquer is celebrated not only for its tangible qualities but also as an emblematic space where stories of identity, memory, and experience are intricately interwoven, showcasing the adaptability of traditional art forms in modern contexts and highlighting the continuity and diversity of identity exploration within the fabric of material culture.

#### **5.4.3 Lacquer as a cloth: Palingenesis & The tail end of time**

In *Lacquer as a Cloth: Palingenesis & The Tail End of Time*, 'cloth' transcends a mere exploration of traditional lacquer art within contemporary artistic contexts; it deeply symbolises a re-examination and new understanding of lacquer's role in self-identity and experiences. By applying lacquer as a second layer of skin which is cloth, I endeavour to encapsulate the natural imprints on skin (stretch marks and wrinkles), symbolising acceptance and recognition of these marks on our body.

This 'cloth' is intended to manifest a new expression of lacquer art in the contemporary art scene. Starting from the projected images of 'lacquer as a skin' (Steps 1 and 2 in Figs. 31 and 32), I highlighted these traces with lines and filled the spaces between with various irregular shapes. This method (step 3 and 4) leads to a shift in focus from direct bodily marks to the abstract shapes surrounding them, suggesting a nuanced interaction between visibility and concealment. By introducing these shapes, the artwork encourages a re-evaluation of the marks they encompass, allowing for their aesthetic integration and, intriguingly, their subtle occlusion.

This creative process represents the visual narrative of 'who I want to be', elevating lacquer beyond its conventional materiality to mediate between personal identity and broader cultural expression. The 'cloth' thus serves not only as a protective layer but also as a means to initiate discussions on self-identity and material value within the realm of Chinese contemporary textile art. Lacquer as a Cloth emphasises reinterpreting our bodily marks through the contemporary use of lacquer, inviting a discourse on self-presentation. This 'cloth' acts as a testament to the past and a vision for future possibilities, illustrating the potential of lacquer to conceal and yet reveal, to protect while also expressing the rich interplay of identity and narrative in Chinese contemporary textile art.

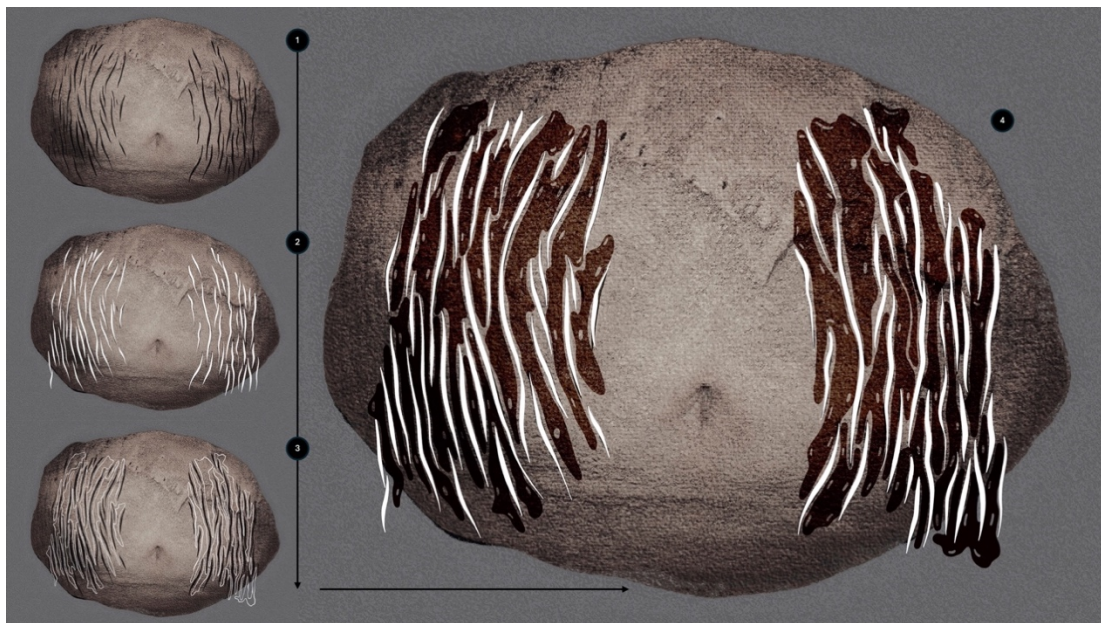


Fig. 31 *Lacquer as a Cloth (shape) — Palingenesis*

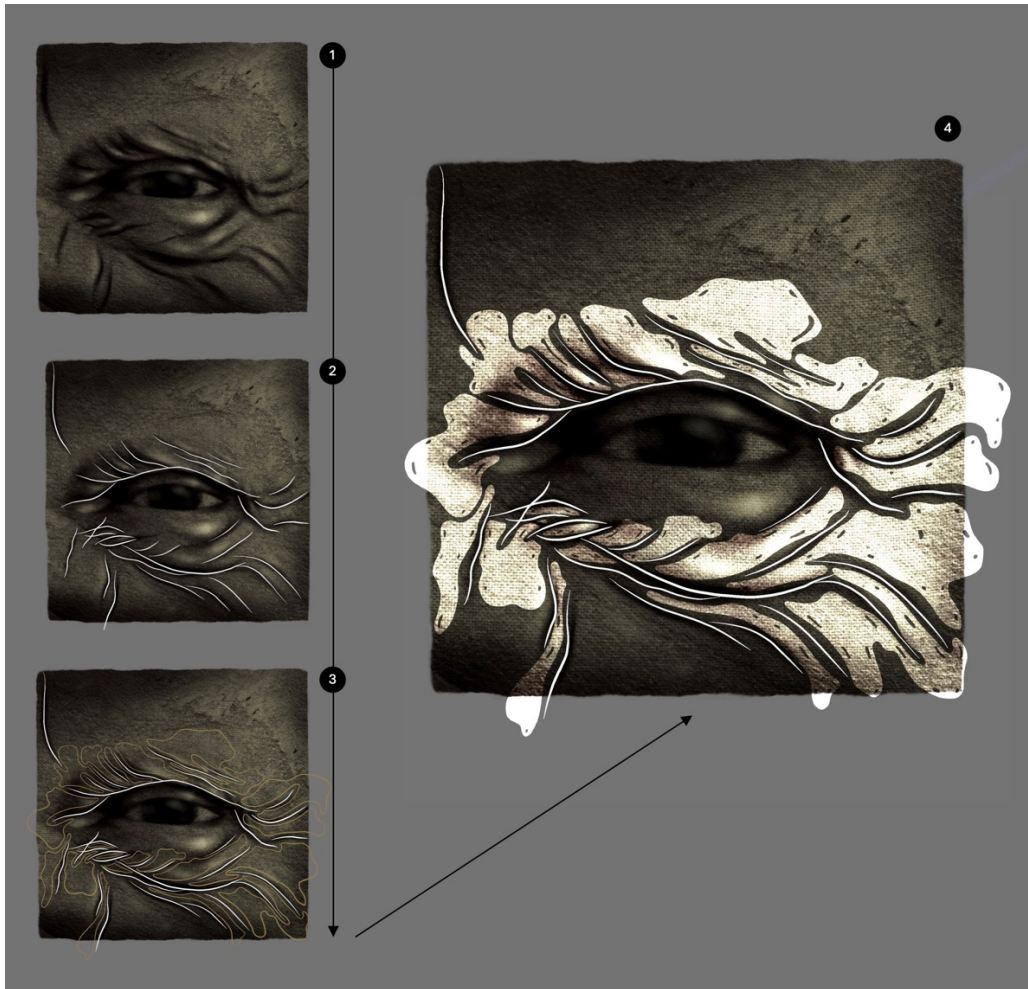


Fig. 32 *Lacquer as a Cloth (shape) — The tail end of time*

The technique used in Lacquer as cloth to make these shapes is called Xipi lacquer technique (rhinoceros skin lacquer). The production process of Xipi lacquer is an irregular and unknown state (Gan, 2019). Xipi lacquer has drawn an irregular 'order' and 'clearer' pattern over time. Xipi lacquer has a long history. The record of Xipi lacquer appeared in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). Many younger people have forgotten this traditional technique. However, the inherent value and attached value of Xipi lacquer, a traditional material and technique, cannot be erased, just like the lines and wrinkles on the skin cannot be erased. As long as the material persists in its value, the value persists in the object to which it attaches (Prown, 2013). These lines depict exactly who I want to be. Perhaps because of the advancement of

modern technology, we have many ways to help us get rid of these unloved lines and wrinkles, but at the same time, we have also provided a new cloth of the skin.

Lacquer as the second skin (cloth), is just like human skin, as humans age, the surface layer of skin becomes thinner and more transparent. The continuous innovation and exploration of Xipi lacquer's style and colour have also covered this layer of skin with a new cloth. Additionally, artefacts created in the past are the only historical evidence that continues to exist today. In addition to the intrinsic value of the material itself, the people who initially made or used it and the values we attach to it today are more ephemeral or variable. Xipi lacquer as a cloth has been added with new value. This value is the understanding and affirmation of the self-identity of the traditional technique of Xipi lacquer. The practical part of the research will look at Xipi lacquer from a new perspective.

The following Figs. 33 and 34 are effect images of the lacquer panels from the *Palingenesis* and *The Tail End of Time* series and there are five steps detail the entire process of creating Xipi lacquer panels:

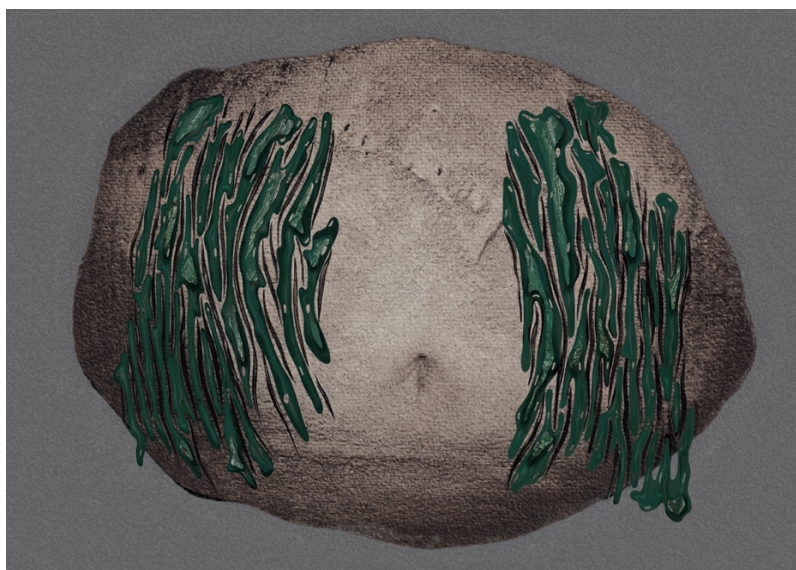


Fig. 33 *Effect images of the lacquer panels, Palingenesis (2022)*

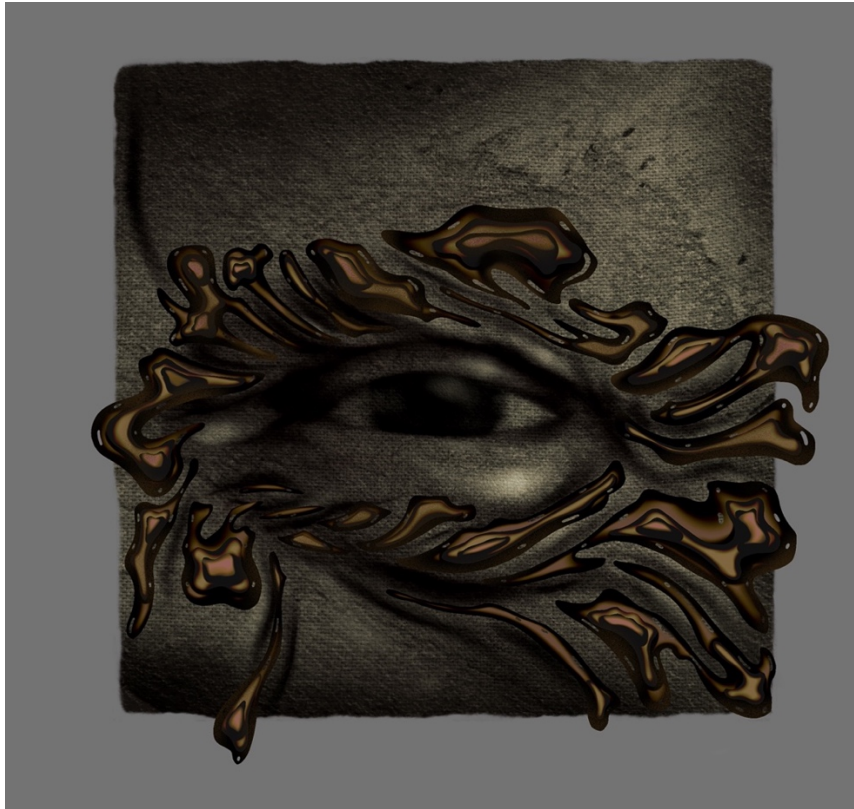


Fig. 34 *Effect images of the lacquer panels, The tail end of time (2022)*

### **Step1: Preparation for base material**

Initially, the substrate, typically derived from wood or bamboo, undergoes a meticulous sanding process to ensure a flawlessly smooth surface, devoid of imperfections, thus preparing it for the subsequent application of lacquer. To make the irregular shapes featured in Fig. 31 and Fig. 32 (step 4), I opted for a 3mm natural bamboo veneer panel as the material for the lacquer panels (see fig. 35), because it is a regenerative grass, thus growing much faster than hardwood trees. This choice makes it a more sustainable and eco-friendlier option (Krososky, 2021). Laser cutting technology was employed to cut these irregular shapes from the bamboo panel (see fig.36 and fig.37).



Fig. 35 *Bamboo panel* (2022)

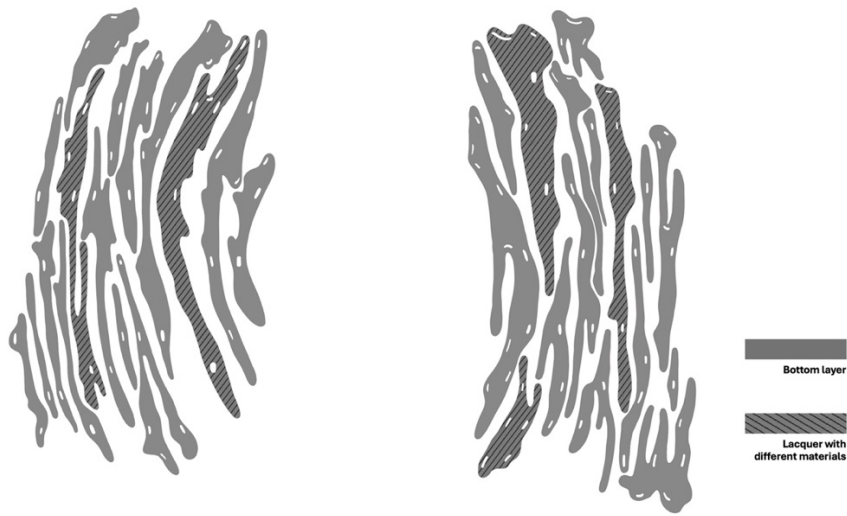


Fig. 36 *Bamboo panel pieces, Palingenesis* (2022)

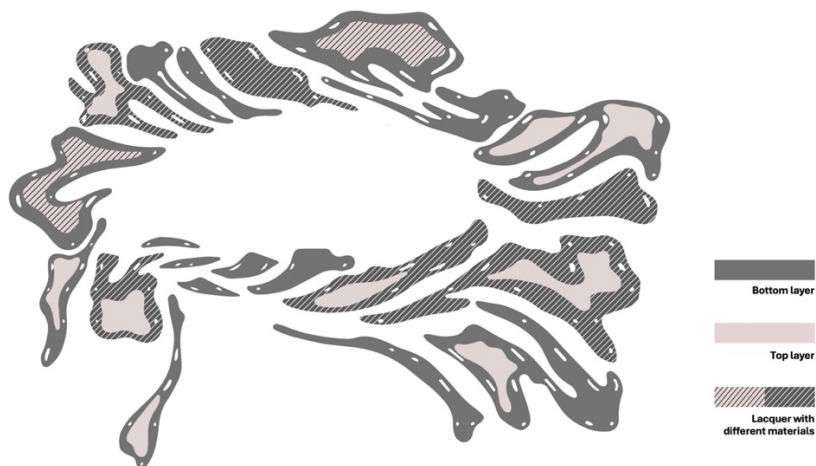


Fig. 37 *Bamboo panel pieces, The tail end of time* (2022)

## Step 2: applying Undercoat

In the Palingenesis series, the predominant colour choice is green, signifying regeneration (as shown in Fig. 38). This selection is anchored in the prevalent association of green with growth and rebirth, a symbolism extensively discussed by Andrew Elliot and Markus Maier (2014) in their seminal work on colour psychology, where they identify green as emblematic of life and natural renewal. In contrast, the primary colour for The Tail End of Time series is dark brown (as shown in Fig. 38), chosen to evoke the cyclical nature of existence and the notion that every termination precedes a new beginning. Brown's connotations of earthiness and decay, reflecting on life's perpetual cycles, which delve into the continuity and ephemeral aspects of life (Elliot & Maier, 2014).

Subsequent to laser cutting of bamboo pieces, the application of an undercoat is pivotal. This foundational lacquer layer, crucial for sealing the substrate and facilitating a smooth base for additional layers, reflects the intricate preparation vital for the fusion of material and symbolism in lacquer art. This process underscores the sophisticated interplay between colour symbolism and materiality, weaving complex meanings into the visual and thematic narrative of the series.

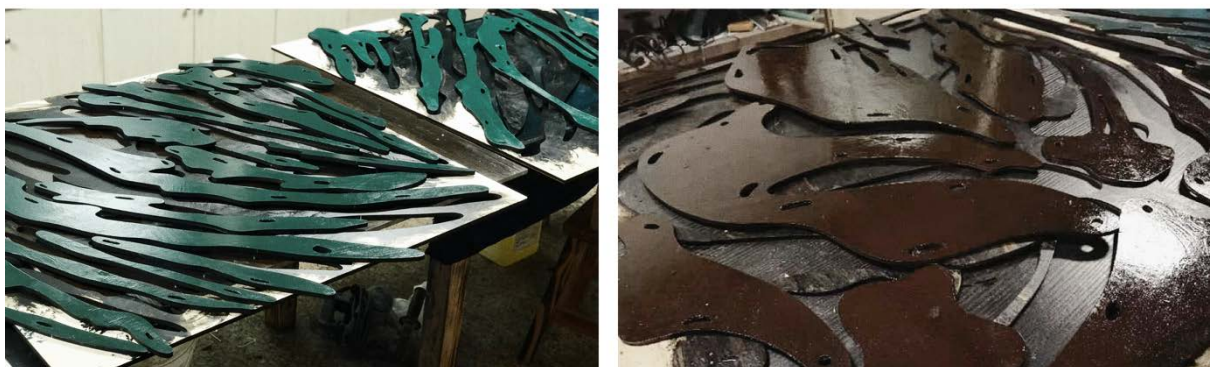


Fig. 38 Applying undercoat (2022)

### **Step 3: Cloth Mounting**

In the traditional craft of lacquerware, a pivotal stage known as ‘裱布’ (cloth mounting) plays a crucial role in preventing the substrate from cracking. Traditionally, raw lacquer is applied to grass cloth woven from ramie fibre before being seamlessly adhered to the base, ensuring a flawless union between the cloth and the substrate. Subsequent layers of lacquer then conceal these fabric foundations entirely, rendering them invisible beneath the surface of the completed piece.

However, my practice delves into experimental realms, transcending the conventional limits of material choice by incorporating a variety of textiles such as hessian fabric, cotton, cling film, tissue, and paper strips (see fig. 39). Diverging from traditional methodologies, these materials are not tightly affixed to the bamboo panel substrate. Instead, they are allowed to fold and overlay the base in a random, undirected manner (see fig. 40). This deliberate departure not only challenges the orthodoxies of lacquerware creation but also serves as a conceptual inquiry into the visibility and significance of foundational materials. By allowing these underlying layers to remain partially exposed, the practice critiques the normative processes of concealment in lacquer art, suggesting a re-evaluation of materiality and craftsmanship. This approach fosters a discourse on the aesthetic and conceptual implications of material choice and application technique, proposing an exploration of identity, process, and material interaction within the contemporary practice of lacquerware.

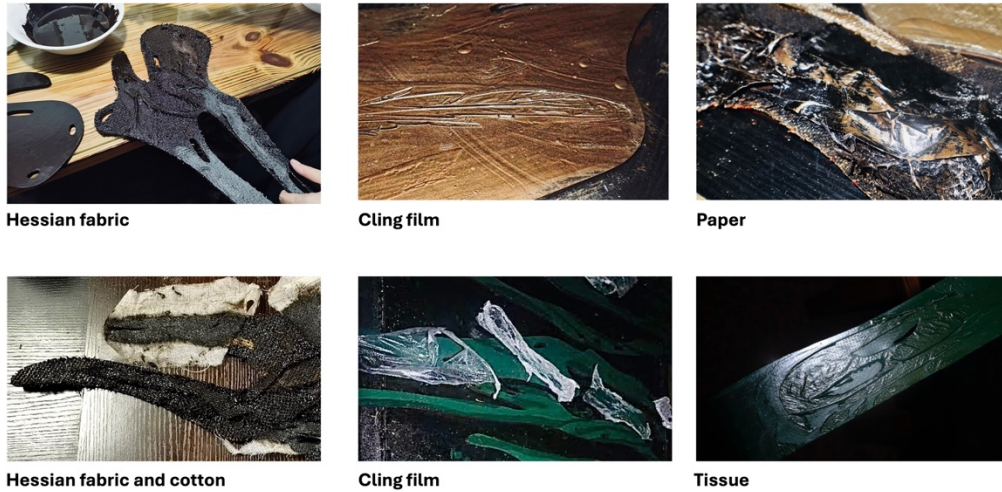


Fig. 39 *Clothing mounting by using different materials* (2022)



Fig. 40 *Finished Piece with Cloth Mounting* (2022)

#### **Step 4: Da Nian process (ridges)**

The most important step in making Xipi lacquer is called 'Da Nian' (also called ridges) (as shown in Fig. 41). The original meaning of 'Nian' is a small embankment made of soil. The purpose of 'Da Nian' is to make protrusions higher than the surface of the object. The shape, height and density of Nian (ridges) determine the shape of the

pattern that will be polished later. These three-dimensional lines determine the final pattern. After 'Da Nian', we need to apply different colours of lacquer in layers on this uneven surface. However, the choice of different colours for each layer will directly affect the final pattern (Gan, 2017). When the uneven surface's bumps are smoothed out, the protrusions created during the 'Da Nian' process become encircled by rings of lacquer in various colours. The section where the lacquer layer is exposed reveals the underlying colour or pattern. At the very beginning, we could only see dots like bean stripes around Nian. With the deepening of the polishing, the dots gradually expand, and the layers of lacquer begin to show circles of texture following the shape of Nian. After polishing, these textures are formed naturally without traces. Da Nian's process is irregular, and the colour of each layer of lacquer is also not fixed. In this process, the final pattern cannot be predicted. Only after the polishing is completed, it can get the final Xipi lacquer look. During the production process, the outcome cannot be predicted neither is the final pattern. However, it is this unknown that gives Xipi lacquer its infinite charm.



Fig. 41 *Da Nian* (n.d.)

During my practice, I tried to change the final pattern of Xipi lacquer by re-designing the traditional Da Nian style (transformation from point to line) and the materials of 'Nian', which is a fixed mode choice. At the same time (as described in chapter 2.1), Jijun Weng's application and expression of Xipi lacquer's new materials is also used as a reference. These Nian are no longer dots, they become lines (as shown in Fig. 42, 43 & 44), which can be seen as traces on the cloth of the new lacquer. Under this cloth, the lines and folds of our skin do not really disappear, but they take on a new appearance on the cloth covering the skin. Lacquer as cloth conveys who I want to be, but we must first, really accept these imperfections in ourselves, these marks that age and the experience they leave on us. This research uses a new way to describe these ridges combined with the traditional Xipi lacquer techniques, thereby answering 'Who I want to be'. The pattern of these lines attached to this layer of cloth becomes a new added value brought by the material of lacquer.



Fig. 42 *Da Nian and polishing on the bamboo panel (2022)*

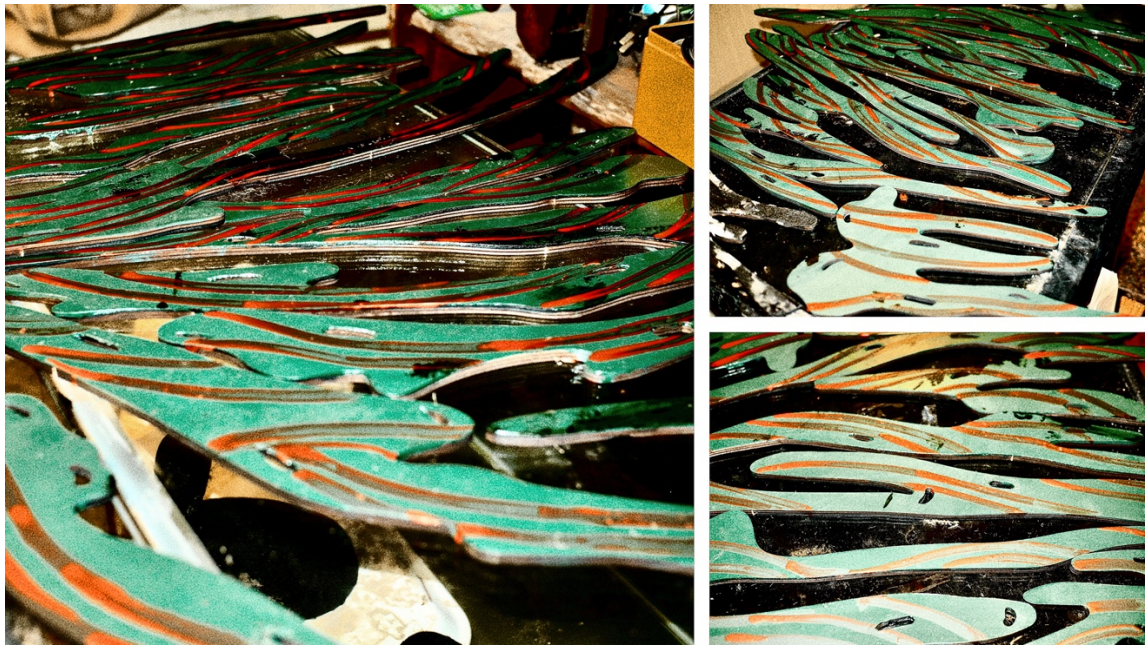


Fig. 43 *Da Nian* process on the bamboo panel, *Palingenesis* (2022)



Fig. 44 *Da Nian* process on the bamboo panel, *The tail end of time* (2022)

**Step 5: Layering coloured lacquer and polishing**

Following the Da Nian process, the next step is layering coloured lacquer. In this step, multiple layers of differently coloured lacquers are meticulously applied to the textured surface, with each layer requiring thorough drying before the application of the next. This layering process allows the colours to blend, creating a rich tapestry of hues and patterns. Once the lacquer is fully dried, the sanding stage begins. Utilising various grades of sandpaper, the surface is carefully smoothed to eliminate any irregularities and to expose the layered lacquer, especially the colours enveloped by the 'Nian' (ridges), thereby revealing diverse patterns.

The production of Xipi lacquer is a protracted one. During the polishing process, I observed that the raised 'Nian' ridges, akin to 'time stamps', resemble the natural lines found on human skin. As skin ages, underlying muscles shift, leading to the formation of wrinkles. The dermis and epidermis thin and adhere more closely, making the blood vessels more pronounced (Wertz, 2013). Although traditional polishing processes eventually erase these initial 'Nian', transforming them into the distinctive patterns of Xipi lacquer, retaining these protrusions adds significant visual and tactile dimensions to the lacquerware. This unique surface treatment not only invites direct engagement with the technique behind the Xipi lacquerware but also enhances its artistic value.

By choosing not to completely smooth these 'Nian' (shown as Fig. 45), the lacquer piece retains extra layers of visual depth and tactile complexity. This approach does not merely aim to preserve the craftsmanship and artistic worth of the lacquerware but also to embrace the 'time stamps' inherent in the Xipi lacquer, signifying the temporal journey of the material. These preserved ridges offer a direct connection to the intrinsic value of lacquer, its historical significance, and its evolving narrative in

the field of contemporary lacquer art. Below are photos of the Finished Xipi lacquer panel:



Fig. 45 *Finished Xipi lacquer panel (1), Palingenesis (2022)*

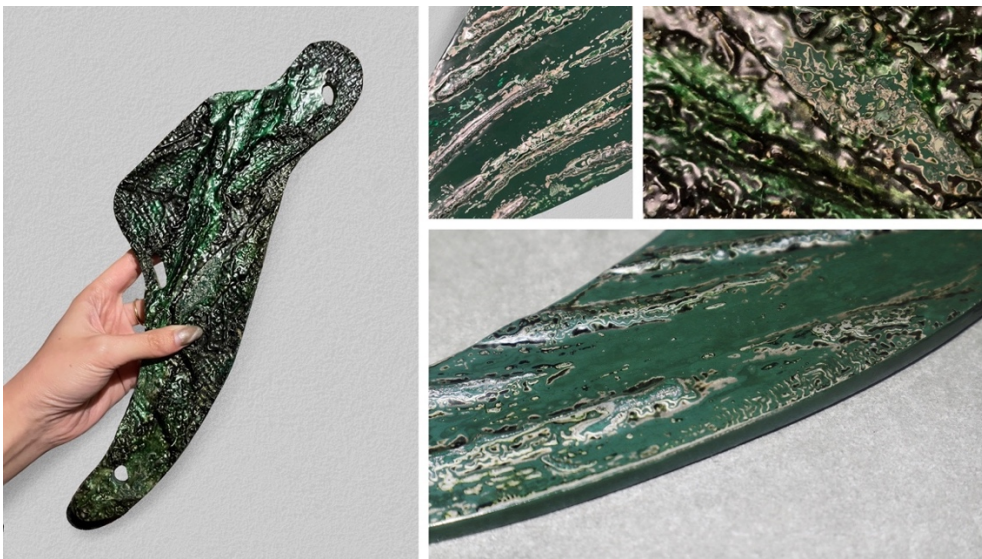


Fig. 46 *Finished Xipi lacquer panel (2), Palingenesis (2022)*



Fig. 47 *Finished Xipi lacquer panel (1), The tail end of time (2022)*

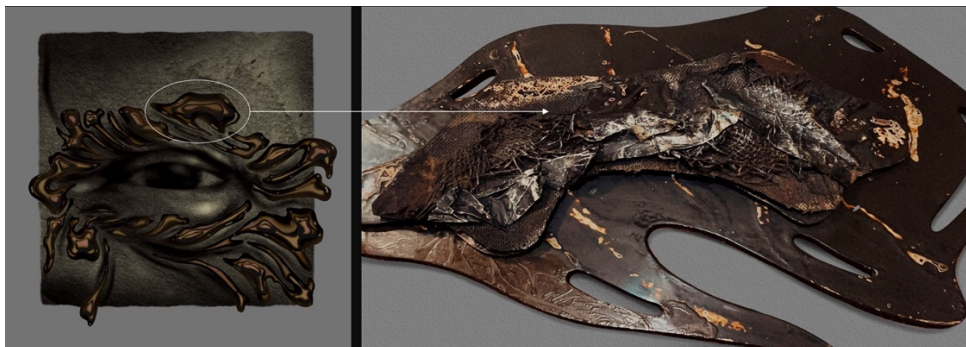


Fig. 48 *Finished Xipi lacquer panel (2), The tail end of time (2022)*

### 5.5 The relationship between skin and cloth - Final Exhibition

This study reconceptualizes contemporary Chinese textile art as the 'body', with lacquer serving metaphorically as 'skin' and 'cloth'. By employing traditional lacquer techniques to depict natural skin marks on semi-sized Xuan paper, we recognise lacquer's inherent material value, thus challenging conventional practices ('cloth mounting', 'Da Nian', and 'polishing') and redefining Xipi lacquer's role in contemporary art. This approach allows for a nuanced expression of identity—echoing Emmi Flodin's (2019) insights on skin as evidence of encounter' and highlighting the tactile and visual impacts of cloth on skin. Such 'skin knowledge',

derived from the imprints left by clothing, extends the use of lacquer beyond its traditional confines, fostering a dialogue between the inner self and the external world. The application within the field of contemporary textile art extends beyond the limitations of lacquer being primarily used as a coating mainly on furniture, utensils, etc. Similarly, textile art also leaves marks on the surface of the lacquer, just as clothing leaves traces on the skin. By applying lacquer to contemporary textile representations, this research evokes notions of embodiment and the skin as a boundary between the inner self and the external world. This research not only invites a re-evaluation of identity and self-perception through the medium of lacquer but also positions contemporary Chinese textile art within a broader artistic and cultural discourse, challenging us to explore the evolving narratives of personal and collective identities.

In Anzieu's formulation, identity is based on skin: "to be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own and, secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations" (1989:51). Although there are fewer explicit mentions of clothing in Anzieu's *Skin Ego*, North (2003) argued that skin ego's full expression relies more on clothing, because owning one's skin requires an acceptance of one's relationship with clothing. As argued by Anne Hollander (1971), skin, like clothing, is easily affected by image. The impression it holds is a tangible visual impression of clothing in the world. The skin, therefore, is neither eternal nor natural, but is like clothing those changes over time, as if framed by an image (Hollander, 1971). Jablonski emphasises that "our skin is us"; "with skin and clothing so interfaced, clothing, too, is us." (Jablonski, 2013:17). Furthermore, Anzieu said that "to be oneself is first of all to have a skin of one's own. Secondly, to use it as a space in which one can experience sensations" (Anzieu, 1989:51). To be yourself, firstly, you should accept your own skin and clothing that really belongs to you; secondly, you should regard it as a space, a surface that people can feel (North, 2013).

In the contemporary dialogue, the body is often conceptualised as a vessel for the exploration and expression of personal and cultural identity. This concept resonates within the domain of contemporary Chinese textile art. My exploration views lacquer as a metaphorical 'cloth', enveloping the 'body' of contemporary Chinese textile art, thus engaging in a nuanced dialogue with the outer realms of contemporary art, serving as a dynamic interface between the individual and the broader spectrum of contemporary artistic discourse. According to Stella North (2013), clothing forges a link between culture, the self-functioning of skin, psychological and physical functions, and the interplay between the internal and external realms. She highlights the role of clothing in the projection and protection of the ego. Essentially, "cloth acts as a screen, offering both a backdrop and a forefront, thus serving as a medium for projecting the self via the body's surface" (North, 2013:77). However, this study delves further into the interrelations among skin, clothing, and body image, underscoring that "dressing the body presents it as an image, thereby rendering the body an image unto itself as well as to the external world." The realm beyond the body is indeed the entire field of contemporary art.

This research posits lacquer, when considered as skin, to be akin to a projector's screen, externalising the body's image and projecting its essence and form onto this screen (who I am). The resulting image, the 'dress image', becomes a means for individuals to convey to the external world 'who I want to be' or 'how I desire to be perceived by others'. This perspective emphasises the dynamic process of identity and self-presentation, where clothing (or lacquer as 'cloth' in this context) serves both as a protective layer and a tool for self-expression, inviting myriad interpretations and perceptions from the world. Such metaphorical interplay prompts a reconsideration of how contemporary Chinese textile art positions itself within the broader landscape of contemporary art. It challenges us to reflect on the fabric of personal and collective

identities woven through interactions with contemporary cultural narratives. By redefining the application of lacquer as skin/cloth, this research not only reinterprets the materiality of lacquer but also positions it as a crucial medium for expressing the evolving identity of contemporary Chinese textile art in relation to the global art scene.

In the final exhibition presentation, the series *Palingenesis* and *The Tail End of Time* will manifest the dual concepts of lacquer as both skin and cloth. The innermost layer reflects the notion of lacquer as skin, with images from Figs. 26 and 27 projected onto semi-mature Xuan paper, adorned with lacquer-drawn stretch marks and wrinkles (as illustrated in Figs. 29 and 30), serving as a metaphor for the fragility and resilience of human skin. This foundational layer is subsequently overlaid with rhinoceros skin lacquer pieces (as depicted in Figs. 33 and 34), symbolising the cloth draped over the skin, yet distinctly separate.

Each lacquer piece, perforated with holes, is intricately woven together using hemp ropes of varying thickness, coated in lacquer (as shown in Fig. 47). This assembly method, akin to operating a loom, horizontally integrates the fragments within a vast weaving frame, securing them into a unified whole. The space between the cloth (lacquer pieces) and the skin (Xuan paper) allows for an interplay of light and shadow, mirroring the dynamic essence of human perception and emotion, inviting audiences to explore this gap between outward appearances and underlying realities.

The gap between these two layers becomes a canvas for the dramatic interaction of light and shadow. In *Palingenesis*, light is projected slowly from a distance, gradually approaching, casting shadows on the skin that grow larger and clearer, signifying the commencement and transformation of a new life journey. Conversely, in *The Tail End*

of Time, the lighting mimics the action of blinking, where moments of darkness intermittently obscure the cloth's shadow on the skin, only to reappear momentarily. The dynamics of light and shadow are further enriched by the audience's movement and interaction, influencing the projection of light and crafting shifting shadows that trace the contours of change and growth, akin to the way stretch marks chronicle the expansion of life.

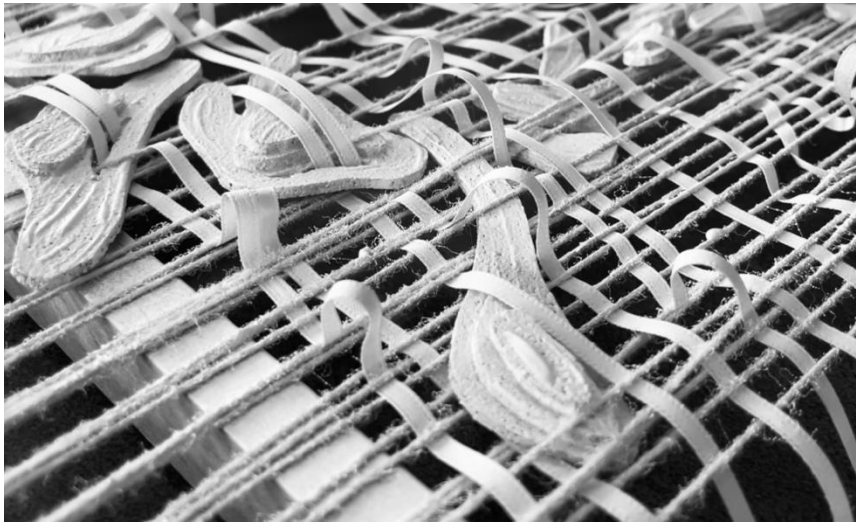


Fig. 49 *Model* (2022)

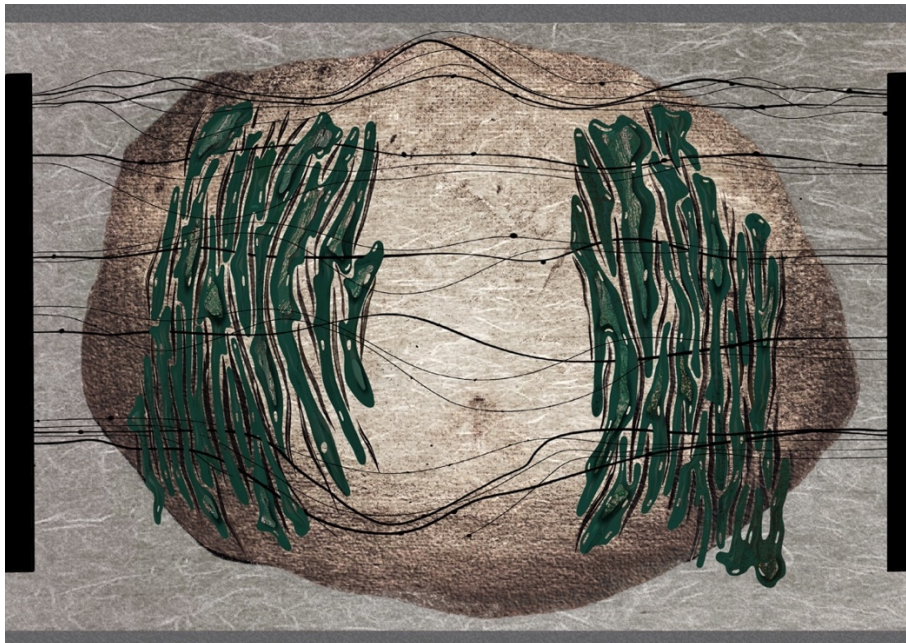


Fig. 50 *Palingenesis* (2022)



Fig. 51 *The tail end of time* (2022)

## 5.6 Studio practice and creative decision-making

While Sections 5.4.3 and 5.5 provided a detailed account of the technical stages involved in the production of *Palingenesis* and *The Tail End of Time*, this section extends the discussion by considering the studio as a site of critical and conceptual decision-making. These practical decisions formed an integral part of the research methodology, constituting not merely technical execution but a mode of thinking through making.

The creation of the lacquer artworks was carried out across two contrasting yet interconnected environments: a traditional lacquer workshop in China and a contemporary textile studio in the UK. This hybrid studio arrangement enabled a sustained dialogue between heritage craftsmanship and contemporary material thinking. Each site presented distinct technical conditions and cultural references. Together, they formed an iterative process of experimentation, failure, adjustment, and reflection.

In China, I worked directly with raw lacquer and traditional tools used in the production of lacquer panels. The panels were created locally, then dried, sealed, and transported to the UK. In the textile studio, I undertook compositional restructuring and material integration, often reconfiguring the lacquer panels with new textile elements. This cross-regional process added layers of meaning and raised questions about how traditional practices might be reactivated and reinterpreted within a globalised artistic context.

The two central works, *Palingenesis* and *The Tail End of Time*, were not executed according to a fixed plan. Instead, they developed through a material inquiry rooted in doing, failing, adjusting, and repeating. The studio process itself became a way of thinking through hands-on engagement with each surface, texture, and combination of materials.

Material compatibility was a recurring concern addressed through trial and error. I tested substrates including hessian fabric, cotton, cling film, tissue, and paper strips (see Fig. F1). Some combinations resulted in deformation or peeling, particularly when smooth or synthetic materials were used. As Master Li explained, “If the layer is cracked or peels, you should start again. That is not something to show” (Li,

Interview, 2023). This comment reflected a mindset where control equals mastery.

Although technically unsuccessful, I chose to retain several of these failed pieces because they revealed the boundaries and limitations of the materials. These fragile or unstable surfaces became part of the conceptual investigation. They reflected tensions between tradition and deviation, as well as between permanence and collapse. I began to think of lacquer not only as a coating but also as a kind of skin or textile that could stretch, wrinkle, or tear, while still retaining meaning.

One significant decision involved altering the traditional method of cloth mounting. Conventionally, ramie is applied smoothly across a substrate before being completely lacquered (see Fig. F2). In my process, the material was mounted loosely, allowing folds and wrinkles to form over the bamboo supports (see Fig. F3). The use of unconventional materials marked a deliberate shift away from traditional cloth-mounting techniques (see Fig. 39). In some cases, cling film was applied directly over the lacquer surface (see Fig. F4), while in others, materials such as paper and hessian were combined within a single composition (see Fig. F5).

These material contrasts disrupted the expected smoothness and uniformity typically associated with conventional finishes. As Master Li in the studio commented in the interview, “If the layer is cracked or peels, you should start again. That is not something to show.” This reaction captured the tension between preservation and transformation. My choice to embrace texture and rupture was therefore not just aesthetic, but also a deliberate challenge to received notions of finish and worth. By layering textures with varying degrees of opacity and density, the work encouraged a different understanding of surface as an unstable, fragile, and composite entity. These exposed areas led me to think about skin not as a smooth or idealised surface

but as one that carries wrinkles, pores, and scars. The work became a site where covering and exposure, control and vulnerability could coexist.

A similar development occurred in my adaptation of the Da Nian technique.

Traditionally used to create dotted ridges, I modified the tools and hand movements to form linear ridges that resemble the lines found in human skin (see Fig. F6).

Simultaneously, the cloth-mounting process introduced its own surface transformations. Materials such as hessian and loosely woven ramie created folds and raised textures during application. When coated with lacquer, these features remained visible and became part of the surface structure. During polishing, I chose not to remove these raised areas. Instead, I preserved both the planned ridges and the fabric-based textures (see Fig. F7), treating them as physical records of the work's formation. These textures suggested connections to the body and to time, shaping the surface through both intention and material behaviour.

In addition to surface textures, the layering of coloured lacquer played a key role in shaping the material language of the work. Two distinct technical approaches were developed. In the version without cloth mounting (see Fig. F8), the surface remained relatively flat, and the focus was on controlling colour depth and visual consistency. Approximately 20 to 22 layers of lacquer were applied using tones such as dark brown, green, silver, and transparent lacquer. Each layer was fully dried before the next was added, following the time-based rhythm of traditional lacquer practice. In the cloth-mounted version (see Fig. F9), the presence of fabrics such as hessian or loosely woven ramie introduced surface irregularities and uneven absorption. This required a denser layering process, with approximately 27 to 29 layers, to ensure coverage of the textures and to allow for the gradual emergence of chromatic complexity during polishing.

While both versions revealed layered colour through sanding, they differed in gloss, texture, and structural density. In this context, colour functioned not merely as a visual element but also as a material language for marking time, process, and the interaction between surface and substance.

In the final stages, a diluted coloured lacquer was sprayed onto semi-sized Xuan paper, creating a translucent tonal layer. The paper was then mounted onto wooden boards as the base for the final composition (see Fig. F10). The choice of semi-sized Xuan paper was informed by its historical connections to Chinese visual culture and by its physical qualities, including translucency, tensile strength, and fragility. These properties aligned closely with the core research themes of skin, memory, and ageing. Although lacquer is rarely used on paper in traditional practice, I intentionally employed this unconventional pairing to emphasise conceptual parallels between skin and paper. Both materials absorb and retain marks over time, making them ideal for exploring ideas of trace and revelation. This juxtaposition further highlighted my investigation into how cultural practices are both inherited and disrupted.

For the final assembly, I transferred the predetermined composition onto a full-scale wooden board. To ensure precise positioning, I first drew a system of proportional grid lines directly on the surface. These reference lines were scaled up from an original sketch that was significantly smaller than the final work (see Fig. F11). Translating the composition from small format to large scale required careful calibration to preserve the spatial relationships between individual lacquer elements. Once the grid was established, I determined the exact location of each lacquer segment. It was essential that the drawn lines aligned with the pre-cut holes in the lacquer panels, which were designed to accommodate thread-based connections (see Fig. F12). This step proved particularly challenging, as the alignment had to account for both horizontal placement and rotational orientation. With the

composition accurately mapped, I began threading lacquer cords of varying thicknesses through the designated holes, linking the segments together (see Fig. F13). These thread lines not only held the elements in place but also introduced a woven structure that referenced both anatomical connectivity and textile construction.

Therefore, the assembly process became not only a method of affixing components but also a way of activating spatial and material relationships through interlacing. The works were assembled in ways that invited shifting visual engagement. Layers of lacquer, fabric, and paper were arranged to encourage movement around the pieces. Subtle changes in light and viewing angle revealed textures and relationships that were not immediately visible. These spatial arrangements mirrored the broader conceptual concerns of partialness, exposure, and layered memory.

Throughout the studio process, I approached each challenge not as a setback but as an opportunity to pause and reconsider. Each test, failure, or deviation became part of the work's evolution. Rather than seeking resolution or polish, I became increasingly interested in how tension, uncertainty, and imperfection could function as forms of knowledge. The project moved beyond questions of craft technique and into questions of meaning, history, and identity.

Appendix E presents photographic documentation of this working process. The annotated images include descriptions of techniques, material decisions, and moments of experimentation.

## **5.7 Chapter Conclusion**

In contemporary Chinese textile art, the incorporation of traditional lacquer methods has led to a novel artistic dialogue, thus rendering it possible to effectively bridge ancient practices with modern sensibilities, interweaving personal narratives with collective experiences. This paper critically evaluates the metaphorical and material relationship of lacquer as both 'skin' and 'cloth', thereby shedding light on the relationship between identity, tradition, and innovation in contemporary art practice.

This exploration began with a thorough analysis of 'lacquer as skin', wherein traditional methods were reimagined to express individual and cultural identities. According to the dual series of PALINGENESIS and THE TAIL END OF TIME, the research, through its emphasis on natural markers of human life – stretch marks and wrinkles – offered a poignant metaphor for the cyclical nature of life and the transformative capacity of memory and rebirth. By applying lacquer to semi-sized Xuan paper and bamboo panels, the research embodied a tactile and visual analysis into the essence of being and the passage of time, resonating with philosophical principles of rebirth and continuity.

The discourse then transitioned to 'lacquer as cloth', a conceptual expansion further probing the relationship between materiality and identity. Here, lacquer transcended its conventional limitations, transforming into a conduit through which narratives of self and society are interwoven. The utilisation of the Xipi lacquer method to generate irregular, abstract patterns not only preserved the value of lacquer but also introduced new layers of meaning – emotional depth, identity exploration, and cultural dialogue – thus enriching contemporary textile art with significance and embodied experience.

This research not only contributes to literature on material culture and contemporary art but also expands the conceptual boundaries of traditional lacquer methods,

prompting a reassessment of their place in the wider fields of art and design. By positioning lacquer at the juncture of 'skin' and 'cloth', the research highlights the material's versatility and symbolic power, encouraging both viewers and practitioners to reconsider how materials can express the identity and experience.

In conclusion, this analysis into lacquer as both 'skin' and 'cloth' in contemporary Chinese textile art signifies a deep engagement with the themes of memory, identity, and transformation. It champions innovation in traditional methods and materials, advocating for their continued relevance and adaptability amid modern challenges and artistic quests. Through its exploration of the tactile and metaphorical dimensions of lacquer, this paper stands as a testament to the lasting power of material culture to convey the complexities of human experience. It is an invitation to future researchers and artists to continue this dialogue between the past and the present, the personal and the collective, the material and the metaphorical.

## **Chapter 6. Conclusion**

### **6.1 Research summary**

In conclusion, the primary aim of this research was to re-evaluate traditional lacquer culture and redefine the contemporary language of lacquer as cloth/skin. This research has also explored a new understanding of the traditional Chinese expression of lacquer as a cloth/skin based on Jules David Prown's theory of material culture. The purpose of this research was to extend new perspective for the development of Chinese contemporary textile art and demonstrate the role of contemporary textile practice as a cultural heritage, thus giving Chinese textile art its cultural value through my practice. The central questions that guided this research

were twofold: First, how does the application of traditional lacquer art to contemporary textile art in China redefine the contemporary lacquer language through the concept of lacquer as cloth/skin? Second, can a new Asian understanding of lacquer as a skin/cloth be constructed by illuminating Jules David Prown's theory of material culture?

## **6.2 Main findings**

This practice-based research centres on repositioning traditional Chinese lacquer art in contemporary Chinese textile art, drawing upon Jules David Prown's theory of material culture. It seeks to redefine the traditional language of lacquer as a cultural symbol in modern textile practices, exploring the dual role of lacquer as both 'skin' and 'cloth'.

### **6.2.1 Reinterpretation of Lacquer**

This practice-based research has advanced a new conceptual framework by interpreting lacquer as both skin and cloth in contemporary Chinese textile art. This interpretation seeks to redefine the contemporary language of lacquer and bring its cultural specificity to the fore. The research sheds light on the characteristics of traditional Chinese lacquer, a material deeply embedded in Chinese culture for millennia, yet one which has become increasingly marginalised in contemporary Chinese art. By integrating lacquer into contemporary textile art, this research elevates lacquer from a purely traditional craft material to a contemporary artistic medium. This emphasises the cultural heritage endowed by its materiality and expands its potential applications in contemporary textile art.

## 6.2.2 Theoretical contribution

Prown's theory, centred on the and attached values of materials, offers a robust framework for analysing the how traditional lacquer can be redefined and appreciated in contemporary textile art practices. As Carnwath and Brown (2014:8) argued, the value of material culture is generated through the interaction between a person (or multiple people) and an object (which may be tangible or intangible, as in 'an idea' or 'activity'). This paper has offered a more in-depth understanding of how lacquer can be applied to contemporary textile art as a significant motivational element.

Building upon Prown's theory of material culture, this research redefines the attached values of lacquer in contemporary Chinese textile art. This redefinition involves the integration of traditional cultural elements with modern artistic expressions, resulting in a new theoretical framework that bridges the divide between the past and the present. It sheds light on the potential for adapting traditional practices to meet contemporary requirements, thereby enriching both theoretical discourse and practical applications.

The concept of lacquer as both 'skin' and 'cloth' is of central importance to this research. As 'skin', lacquer reflects intrinsic value, including its cultural heritage and identity, whereas, as 'cloth', it represents its attached value, illustrating its capacity for adaptation and redefinition in modern artistic contexts. This duality offers a comprehensive understanding of the role and significance of lacquer in contemporary textile art.

Lacquer, in its essence, reflects value, reflecting cultural heritage and identity much akin to the protective layer of 'skin.' Simultaneously, lacquer acts as a metaphorical 'cloth,' showcasing acquired value through its adaptability and reinterpretation in

contemporary artistic practices. This duality offers a comprehensive understanding of lacquer's function and importance in modern textile art.

It began with an exploration of the value embodied in the language of traditional lacquer work, a value closely tied to both the materiality of lacquer itself and its significance in Chinese culture. This exploration shed light on the diverse factors that have curtailed the progression of contemporary art in China, including the pervasive influence of Western art since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. In addition, the belated and tenuous integration of textile art in educational structures has also presented a significant obstacle. In light of these limitations, this research hypothesizes that contemporary Chinese textile art must accentuate its cultural identity and embrace diversity to cultivate novel materials, methods, and concepts imbued with unique Chinese values. Drawing upon Prown's material culture theory, these findings advocate for the evocative use of lacquer as 'skin', enabling it to express the profound and inherent value of human identity in contemporary Chinese textile art.

Secondly, the research analysed the symbolic value conveyed by lacquer when conceptualised as a cloth adorning the skin. This newly conceptualised value comprises the aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of lacquer, tracing its transition from a traditional craft idiom to an artistic language. This artistic language of lacquer has progressively diversified, flourishing at the nexus of traditional and contemporary art, as well as in the relationship between international and domestic artistic dialogues. The symbolic value of lacquer is thus according to a synthesis of theory and praxis. Chapter 4 evaluates case studies of various lacquer artists to explain this understanding of lacquer's cultural value. These case studies shed light on the lasting value of tradition, memory, and the continual regeneration of lacquer art. The diverse backgrounds and artistic expressions of these artists demonstrate

how differing perspectives can imbue the same material – lacquer – with a multiplicity of cultural meanings.

### **6.2.3 Lacquer Art between skin and cloth**

This practice-based research produced two significant collections: PALINGENESIS and THE TAIL END OF TIME. Demonstrating new artefacts that blend traditional lacquer methods with contemporary textile designs, these collections exemplify the practical application of the research findings. This research constitutes the first comprehensive analysis into how traditional methods can be innovatively employed in contemporary textile art contexts. It demonstrates that lacquer can serve both aesthetic and functional purposes in textile art. As a protective layer ('skin'), it maintains its traditional role, while as an expressive medium ('cloth'), it leads to new possibilities for artistic expression.

The first lacquer as skin/cloth art collection, PALINGENESIS, explored the traditional cultural value of lacquer, which has become increasingly marginalised. It also recorded the moment of its regeneration as it is gradually brought back into focus. The concept of Palingenesis was inspired by the stretch marks on a pregnant woman's abdomen, often perceived as a blemish to be concealed. Akin to that lacquer occupies a similar position in contemporary art, it too is often regarded as a readily disposable art form. In this collection, traditional lacquer art was reborn in its progenitor (contemporary Chinese textile art), leaving indelible traces on the skin.

The second series, THE TAIL END OF TIME, centered on the theme of temporality and its conclusion. Nevertheless, the end of each life can be interpreted as the beginning of rebirth. In this second collection, the 7,000-year-old lacquer tradition is

imbued with the traces of time, capturing the final countenance of our skin as it travels through time – the inevitable wrinkles around the eyes. Research suggests that many women are averse to wrinkles and experience reduces self-esteem; accordingly, however, this so-called imperfection can also be viewed as a compelling marker of time's passage. Similarly, lacquer is often readily labelled as antiquated and uninteresting in contemporary art. This work utilised lacquer to depict the wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, to chronicle the end of time. The underlying notion was one of accepting the ageing process, a process often disregarded accurately because it finally signifies rebirth.

Each collection comprises two parts: lacquer as skin and lacquer as cloth. They are both unique and related. The research firstly explored the specific definition of lacquer as skin in depth, hypothesizing that lacquer as skin constitutes not only the surface of the body but also the surface of the mind. The skin cannot fundamentally shift our identity, implying that as time elapses, nothing beneath the skin truly vanishes; it is merely concealed. Similarly, lacquer itself does not disappear; it simply recedes temporarily from the scope of contemporary art. Lacquer as skin has helped to shape and express our bodies and consciousness, representing the contemporary identity of Chinese textile art. Lacquer can also be understood as cloth, the second skin of lacquer. This cloth forms the boundary between the inner world (body and skin) and the external world, yet it also connects the two. As Hollander (1993) proposes, clothing acts as a projected screen for the body. The authentic self-resides in this screen, while the image projected outwards conveys 'who I want to be.'

#### **6.2.4 Revitalisation of Lacquer Techniques**

The practical aspect of this study explores the novel application of traditional Chinese lacquer methods in contemporary textile art, focusing upon the dual roles of lacquer as both skin and cloth. This exploration, predicated upon the concept of lacquer as skin/cloth, challenges established perceptions and offers fresh perspectives on the material's application and significance in modern artistic practice. The research emphasises the capacity of lacquer, as a traditional medium, to express complex narratives of identity, memory, and cultural heritage through a contemporary art perspective. Through the application of Prown's theory of material culture, the study evaluates the historical, cultural, and technical facets of lacquer, shedding light on its significance in contemporary art. This interdisciplinary approach unites qualitative research, case studies, and practical experimentation, presenting a comprehensive framework for artists and researchers exploring lacquer's application in contemporary art. The practical component utilises an experimental methodology to document conditions, materials, methods, and equipment.

Central to this study is the metaphorical deployment of lacquer as skin/cloth. When conceived of as skin, lacquer symbolises identity and personal narrative. In the *PALINGENESIS* and *The TAIL END OF TIME* series, stretch marks and wrinkles operate as metaphors for the cyclical nature of life, foregrounding themes of memory, identity, and transformation. By employing lacquer on semi-sized Xuan paper to depict the natural lines produced by skin growth, such as stretch marks and crow's feet, the study indicates the shift of lacquer from a traditional coating to a vibrant medium of cultural expression, generating novel textures and artistic expressions.

When lacquer is interpreted as cloth, the traditional Xipi lacquer method is redefined through adaptations to the *Da Nian* process, innovative cloth mounting methods, and unconventional materials, producing unique shapes and patterns. This redefinition signifies the preservation and regeneration of cultural heritage in a contemporary

context, illustrating the continuous dialogue between traditional craftsmanship and modern artistic practice. This research has produced a more profound understanding of how this reinterpretation not only safeguards the value of lacquer but also introduces supplementary values such as emotional depth, identity exploration, and cultural dialogue.

### **6.3 Future directions**

The central theoretical implication of this research is in the assertion that the intrinsic value of lacquer as a representation of skin is rooted in both its materiality and the newly ascribed values identified in this study when lacquer is utilised as cloth. The development of lacquer art in China, from its apex in the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) to its current state of gradual decline, indicates a shifting perception of its value. In effect, contemporary youth often perceive it as an art form readily relinquished (Guo, 2016). This metaphorical skin, it appears, no longer reflects permanence, its value seemingly eroded by the advancements of modern technology. This research intervenes in this narrative by intertwining traditional Chinese lacquer art with textile art. Through this practice, a novel garment appears, one that not only conveys the conceptual significance of lacquer as a second skin but also ushers lacquer art into the domain of textile art, imbuing it with a renewed contemporary aesthetic. The findings of this research offer valuable insights for the development of new apparel in Chinese contemporary textile art.

Recent developments further suggest that lacquer art is beginning to re-enter the public imagination, partly due to its dissemination on social media platforms. Shortly after completing my own lacquer-based works, I came across a video by the internet personality Ziqi Li, who introduced traditional lacquer techniques to a wide online

audience. Her video, released on YouTube, received more than 4.1 million views and over 370,000 likes within just two days, with tens of thousands of comments expressing admiration and curiosity. On Chinese platforms such as Weibo, the video gained over 100 million views and 1.6 million total interactions (likes, shares, and comments) within the first five and a half hours. These statistics highlight a powerful resurgence of public interest in traditional craft practices. This timing revealed an unexpected opportunity: to amplify the visibility of lacquer through digital engagement and reclaim public discourse around its value. In this context, I began to consider how my research might also contribute to this moment of resurgence, not only through academic channels but also by making a broader public claim via visual storytelling and online platforms.

This study, however, hypothesizes the concept of lacquer as skin/cloth as the sole avenue for its incorporation into textile art, potentially overlooking the full spectrum of lacquer's expressive capacity. Further exploration is necessary, particularly regarding traditional lacquer art, to fully understand its potential in contemporary Chinese textile art. Moreover, a deeper understanding of the multifaceted values attributed to lacquer is crucial. While this study primarily employs traditional rhinoceros-skin lacquer methods for its practical application, the vast repertoire of traditional lacquer methods, including gilding, inlay, and carved lacquer, offers wealth of possible applications for future studies.

Future research could explore these additional methods and their potential symbiosis with textile art. Gilding, for instance, with its application of fine gold leaf to the lacquer surface, could infuse textile artworks with a newfound opulence and depth. Inlay methods, which involve the embedding of materials such as mother-of-pearl, metal, or ivory into the lacquer, offer the potential to generate complex designs that increase

the tactile and visual impact of textiles. Carved lacquer, celebrated for its complex and elaborate designs, could be employed to create textured surfaces that engage with light and shadow in innovative and captivating manners.

Lacquered textiles present a rich area for future research, particularly through experimental studies exploring their performance under diverse environmental conditions. A comprehensive understanding of how these materials respond to different levels in humidity, temperature, and light exposure is crucial. Such insights would prove invaluable in developing robust preservation methods, enabling the wider application of lacquered textiles in fashion and interior design. Further analysis should also consider the potential of interdisciplinary collaborations. By engaging with experts in materials science, textile engineering, and cultural heritage conservation, innovative approaches to integrating lacquer with textiles can be realised. These partnerships hold the potential to unlock new composite materials, marrying the advantageous properties of lacquer with the versatility of textile fibres. The resulting artworks would achieve a balance of beauty and durability.

Beyond material exploration, future research should evaluate the cultural implications of merging traditional lacquer methods with contemporary textile art. Analysing audience reception, both in China and internationally, can shed light on the global resonance of these art forms. Such analysis can spark vital discussions surrounding cultural preservation and innovation, highlighting the evolving relationship between heritage practices and modern creative expression.

Furthermore, during my teaching practice as a lecturer working closely with international students, I initiated group discussions and experimental workshops where students were invited to reflect on traditional techniques from their own cultural backgrounds that have fallen out of mainstream use. These workshops became

platforms for reactivating fading craft knowledge through contemporary artistic methods. One key takeaway was that the conceptual framework and methodology developed in this research—particularly the recontextualisation of traditional materials and techniques—proved adaptable across national and disciplinary boundaries. Students from countries including India, Iran, and Mexico were able to draw parallels between lacquer and craft techniques from their own traditions, such as block printing, miniature painting, or woven bark textiles. This demonstrated the broader applicability of the research and its relevance to global conversations around the preservation and transformation of material heritage.

Finally, securing funding for research in this area is paramount. Alleviating financial constraints will empower more ambitious projects, including large-scale studies and exhibitions capable of showcasing the full potential of lacquered textiles. This increased visibility stands to attract significant attention from artistic communities and commercial industries, opening doors to new opportunities for artists and designers. By addressing these areas, and building on the findings of this study, it is possible to cultivate a deeper appreciation for the unique qualities of lacquer and its diverse applications in contemporary textile art.

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## **Appendix A. Participant Information Sheet – Interview**

### **Research Title: Lacquer as a Skin: Chinese Contemporary Textile Art**

#### **Purpose of the Study:**

The aim of this research is to re-evaluate traditional lacquer culture and redefine the contemporary language of lacquer as cloth/skin. This study seeks to explore a new understanding of the traditional Chinese expression of lacquer as a cloth/skin based on Jules David Prown's theory of material culture, thereby shedding new light on Prown's theory. Additionally, the research aims to extend new perspectives for the development of Chinese contemporary textile art and demonstrate the role of contemporary textile practice as a cultural heritage, thus highlighting its cultural value.

#### **Research Questions:**

- How does the application of traditional lacquer art to contemporary textile art in China redefine the contemporary lacquer language through the concept of lacquer as cloth/skin?
- Can a new Asian understanding of lacquer as a skin/cloth be constructed by illuminating Jules David Prown's theory of material culture?

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview. The interview will focus on your experiences and perspectives regarding lacquer and textile art. It is anticipated that the interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. With your consent, the interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy in data collection. The recorded data will be transcribed, and only anonymised transcripts will be used in the research analysis and publications.

#### **Confidentiality:**

All information collected during the interview will be kept confidential. Your identity will be anonymized in all reports and publications resulting from this research. Only the researcher will have access to the data, which will be securely stored.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time during the interview and within a month after the interview, without any negative consequences. If you choose to withdraw, all data related to your participation will be destroyed, and you do not need to provide any reasons for your withdrawal.

**Contacts:**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact me at [jing.guo@uca.ac.uk](mailto:jing.guo@uca.ac.uk) and [re.met822@gmail.com](mailto:re.met822@gmail.com)

*Thank you for considering participating in this study. If you decide to take part, please sign the attached consent form.*

## Appendix B. Ethical Consent Form for Participants

**Research Title: Lacquer as a Skin: Chinese Contemporary Textile Art**

### Taking Part

| Please tick the appropriate boxes  | Yes | No |
|--|-----|----|
| I have read and understood the research information provided in the "Participant Information Sheet"  |     |    |
| I agree to participate in this study and take part in a semi-structured interview.   |     |    |
| The interview will be audio-recorded for accuracy in data collection.  |     |    |
| I understand that my taking part is entirely voluntary; I have the right to withdraw anytime during the interview and within a month after I have taken part in the interview.   |     |    |
| I do not have to give any reasons why I no longer want to take part. If you choose to withdraw, all data related to my participation will be destroyed.  |     |    |
| I understand all information collected during the interview will be kept confidential. My identity will be anonymised in all reports and publications resulting from this research. Only the researcher will have access to the data, which will be securely stored. |     |    |
| I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.  |     |    |
| I agree for the data I provide to be used for the intended research project.   |     |    |

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name), have read and understood the information provided above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time and that my information will be kept confidential.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Consent for Audio Recording:**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant's name), consent to having my interview audio-recorded for the purposes of this study. I understand that the recordings will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this study.

## **Appendix C. Interview Questions – Case Study Interviews for Lacquer Artists**

### **Interview Schedule for Lacquer as a skin: Chinese Contemporary Textile Art**

| <b>Field</b>                   | <b>Information</b> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Full Name                      |                    |
| Age                            |                    |
| Number of years in Profession  |                    |
| Current Workplace/Organisation |                    |
| Specialisation                 |                    |
| Notable Projects or Works      |                    |
| Email                          |                    |
| Website/Portfolio              |                    |

#### **1. Lacquer as a skin:**

- Have you heard the saying that lacquer is the first skin of furniture?
- What are your thoughts on this viewpoint?

#### **2. Inspiration and Techniques:**

- What sources of inspiration do you draw upon when creating your lacquer art?
- Which specific techniques do you find most essential in your practice?

#### **3. Evolution of Lacquer Art:**

- In your opinion, how has lacquer art evolved in recent years?
- What do you think has been the most significant innovation in lacquer techniques?

**4. Cultural Significance:**

- How do you perceive the cultural significance of lacquer art in modern times?
- In what ways do you strive to preserve traditional aspects of lacquer art in your work?

**5. Material and Aesthetics:**

- How do you choose the materials you use in your lacquer creations?
- What role does colour play in your artistic expression with lacquer?

**6. Collaboration and Learning:**

- Have you collaborated with other artists or craftsmen in your lacquer projects? If so, how has this influenced your work?
- What key skills or knowledge do you believe are necessary for someone entering the field of lacquer art?

**7. Sustainability and Challenges:**

- How do you address sustainability in your lacquer art practice?
- What challenges do you face in maintaining the quality and authenticity of your lacquer works?

**8. Application of Lacquer in Textiles:**

- What are your views on the integration of lacquer art with contemporary textile art?
- What potential do you see in combining these two mediums, and what challenges might arise?

## **Appendix D. Interview Questions – Case Study Interviews for Textile Artist**

### **Interview Schedule for Lacquer as a skin: Chinese Contemporary Textile Art**

| <b>Field</b>                   | <b>Information</b> |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| Full Name                      |                    |
| Age                            |                    |
| Number of years in Profession  |                    |
| Current Workplace/Organisation |                    |
| Specialisation                 |                    |
| Notable Projects or Works      |                    |
| Email                          |                    |
| Website/Portfolio              |                    |

**1. Introduction and Background:**

- Could you please introduce yourself and tell us about your background in textile art?
- How did you first become interested in textile art, and what motivated you to pursue it professionally?

**2. Influences and Inspiration:**

- What major influences (historical, cultural, personal) have shaped your approach to textile art?
- Can you share an example of a specific artwork or artist that has significantly influenced your work?

**3. Techniques and Innovation:**

- What new techniques or technologies have you incorporated into your textile art practice?
- How do you balance traditional methods with modern innovations in your work?
- What are your views on integrating lacquer into contemporary textile art?
- What potential do you see in combining these two mediums, and what challenges might arise?

**4. Cultural Identity and Expression:**

- How do you express Chinese cultural identity and heritage through your textile art?
- In what ways do you think contemporary textile art can contribute to cultural dialogue and understanding?

**5. Education and Knowledge Sharing:**

- What role does education play in the development of contemporary textile artists in China?
- How do you think the current educational system for textile arts could be improved?

**6. Market and Public Perception:**

- How do you perceive the market for contemporary textile art in China and internationally?
- What challenges do you face in gaining recognition and appreciation for textile art?

**7. Sustainability and Social Responsibility:**

- How do you address environmental and sustainability concerns in your textile art practice?
- What social responsibilities do you believe textile artists have in today's world?

**8. Future Directions and Challenges:**

- What do you see as the future directions for Chinese contemporary textile art?
- What are the biggest challenges you anticipate for the next generation of textile artists?

## **Appendix E – Interview Transcripts (Selected Participants)**

This appendix contains 6 selected interview transcripts referenced in the main thesis. All participants gave verbal consent for their contributions to be included. Each transcript includes a minimum of 4 key interview questions for contextual clarity, with highlighted quotations corresponding to the in-text citations.

Due to the length and volume of the original interview material, only representative excerpts are included here to support the key themes and arguments of the research. Full transcripts are available upon request by contacting the author, in accordance with ethical research practice and participant confidentiality.

### **Participant A – Gallery Curator (2022)**

**Interview Format:** Online interview (WeChat, transcribed)

**Date:** 8 March 2022

**Location:** Online

**Language:** Chinese (translated to English with permission)

**Interviewer:** Jing Guo

**Interviewee:** Participant A (an experienced gallery curator working in Beijing, with over 15 years curating exhibitions focused on contemporary East Asian materials and practices)

**Q1: *In your experience, how is lacquer viewed in the contemporary art scene?***

**A1: *Lacquer rarely appears in contemporary shows, not because it lacks value, but because most people don't know how to read it.*** I think that's the real issue. It's not that lacquer is outdated or irrelevant — it's just that many people don't have the visual or cultural vocabulary to engage with it in a meaningful way. It needs cultural context to be fully understood. The material carries so much history that without background, it can appear decorative or old-fashioned.

**Q2: *As a curator, what are the biggest challenges in presenting lacquer today?***

**A2:** The first is definitely perception. People tend to view lacquer as either antique or decorative. It's difficult to frame it as contemporary unless the artist really pushes the boundary of form. Also, in international contexts, lacquer is often reduced to a "craft" label.

**Q3: *How do you suggest shifting that perception?***

**A3:** Framing is everything. You put a lacquer piece next to a piece of generative AI art, suddenly people start to think about time, memory, tradition differently. The contrast is what allows both to speak louder. You place a lacquer piece next to digital work, suddenly you create a contrast that recontextualises both.

**Q4: *How do viewers typically respond to lacquer works depending on context?***

**A4:** It depends on how the work is positioned. If it's framed as craft, people look for perfection. If it's framed as concept, they look for meaning. That's why curation really matters. You can guide the audience to see beyond the surface.

### **Participant B – Textile Student (2021)**

**Interview Format:** In-person interview (transcribed)

**Date:** 12 March 2021

**Location:** Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology

**Language:** Chinese (translated into English with permission)

**Interviewer:** Jing Guo

**Interviewee:** Participant B (final-year undergraduate student in textile design at the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology)

**Q1: *What was your reaction to seeing Guanzhen Wu's lacquer work combined with ramie?***

**A1:** *I had never imagined lacquer could feel soft, but Wu's combination with ramie made it seem like it could move.* It really surprised me. Normally when we study lacquer, it's all about furniture or decorative boxes—hard, glossy, cold. But this felt more alive, almost textile-like. I kept staring at how the surface folded slightly. It wasn't perfect, but that's what made it interesting. It changed my emotional response completely.

**Q2: Did it change your perspective on lacquer as a material?**

**A2:** Definitely. *I started to think about how other hard materials might become flexible too, depending on how we work with them.* It opened something in my thinking. We often separate materials into categories, rigid versus soft, but maybe that's limiting. It made me realise materials aren't fixed; they can be reimagined through technique.

**Q3: Have you tried applying this idea in your own work?**

**A3:** Yes, actually. I'm working on a graduation project where I'm using transparent resin with stitched textiles. I'm trying to find that balance between solid and fluid. Lacquer and ramie gave me a good reference—how to let materials carry tension instead of hiding it. I want the structure to look like it's under pressure but still flowing.

**Q4: What do you think are the main challenges in combining such different material cultures?**

**A4:** I think the bigger challenge is respect—how do you treat both materials with care, without letting one dominate the other? You need to understand the logic of each material before you bring them together.

### **Participant C – Contemporary Artist (2022)**

**Interview Format:** Audio interview (transcribed)

**Date:** 28 October 2022

**Location:** Shanghai, studio visit

**Language:** Chinese (translated into English with permission)

**Interviewer:** Jing Guo

**Interviewee:** Participant C (a mid-career contemporary artist based in Shanghai, with a focus on cross-cultural material practices and installation art)

**Q1: What was your first impression of Weng's work?**

**A1:** Weng's work surprised me. *It felt Western at first. The structure, the spatial openness, even the colour palette.* I remember standing in front of it and thinking, this could be from Berlin or London. There was a kind of lightness, maybe even coolness, that I didn't associate with traditional Chinese aesthetics. It didn't conform to what I expected from a lacquer-based work.

**Q2: *What made it feel Chinese to you despite that?***

**A2:** But then I noticed how the lacquer surface held something more meditative and restrained. It told a Chinese story in a Western accent. That sentence popped into my head immediately. The brushstrokes were invisible; the surface was subtle. It had a quietness that I think is very Chinese. There is something about restraint and reverence that felt familiar. Like it was whispering rather than declaring.

**Q3: *Do you think materials carry cultural codes?***

**A3:** Absolutely. I do not think you even need to know a material's history consciously. Your body feels it. The way light reflects off lacquer, the depth of its layers, it creates a kind of presence that is not neutral. Even if you never studied lacquer, you intuit something ancient. It is like memory is embedded in the surface. You can feel the difference between something mass-produced and something that carries a lineage. Lacquer has that lineage, and it communicates slowly, over time. The more you look, the more it reveals. In my own work, I try to choose materials that have this kind of quiet but powerful presence.

**Q4: *How do you balance cultural memory and artistic innovation in your own work?***

**A4:** It is a negotiation every time. I work a lot with clay and pigment, and I always try to listen to what the material wants to say. You respect what the material carries, its lineage. But you also ask what else it can do. I think the most interesting works come from asking uncomfortable questions of traditional materials.

**Q5: *Would you consider working with lacquer yourself?***

**A5:** I am intrigued now. Honestly, before seeing Weng's work, I dismissed lacquer as mostly decorative, too smooth, too finished. But that piece disrupted my assumptions. It felt alive. Now I am curious about how lacquer could behave differently if I approached it with the logic I use in installation. So yes, I would consider it.

**Participant D – Mother with Stretch Marks (2022)**

**Interview Format:** Voice message exchange (WeChat, transcribed with permission)

**Date:** 19 September 2022

**Location:** Beijing, China

**Language:** Chinese (translated into English)

**Interviewer:** Jing Guo

**Interviewee:** Participant D (a mother in her early 30s who volunteered to be photographed for the *Palingenesis* series)

**Q1: How did you feel when you were first asked to take part in the stretch mark photography?**

**A1:** I hesitated. I do not usually show my belly to anyone, not even to myself. **Most of the time I try to cover it.** But I was curious and maybe a little hopeful. I thought that seeing my body through someone else's perspective might help me understand it differently too.

**Q2: What have your stretch marks meant to you personally?**

**A2:** **I used to cover my stretch marks because they reminded me of what I thought I had lost. I felt like I had lost control over my body, over how I looked, and over how confident I used to feel. They made me feel broken. But later I realised they were not just scars.** They marked the moment I became a mother. They are the only visible memory on my body of the life I brought into the world. It took me a long time to even look at them without feeling ashamed. Now, I sometimes touch them softly, as if they are part of something strong that has stayed with me.

**Q3: Has participating in the project changed how you view your body?**

**A3:** Yes, it really has. When I saw the image you created, I realised that I am not the only one. My body did exactly what it needed to do. There is a kind of quiet strength in that. The way you showed the skin, with all its texture and light, helped me to see it not as ruined but as meaningful and alive.

**Q4: What emotions came up during the photo process?**

**A4:** I felt nervous and exposed, but I also felt respected. You explained everything clearly and gave me time. I never felt pushed or judged. That helped me trust the process. I felt like I was doing something that mattered, not just for myself but maybe for others too.

**Q5: Would you share these photos with others, like family or friends?**

**A5:** I would not share them with everyone, but I did show them to my husband. He became very quiet and then said that he wished he had thanked my body more often.

That moment alone made it all worthwhile. I think I have stopped hiding them from myself.

### **Participant M – Female Interviewee in Her 60s (2022)**

**Interview Format:** In-person conversation (transcribed)

**Date:** 22 October 2022

**Location:** London, UK

**Language:** English

**Interviewer:** Jing Guo

**Interviewee:** Participant M (a British colleague of the artist, working in the creative industry, who volunteered to take part in the wrinkle photography project)

**Q1: *How do you feel about the wrinkles you see in yourself?***

**A1:** Every advertisement tells you that ageing is a problem. Sometimes I catch myself wishing I looked younger. Especially around the eyes. It's like your face changes when you weren't watching. And I think, oh no—where did that come from? ***Every advertisement tells you that ageing is a problem. Sometimes I catch myself wishing I looked younger. But I also know these lines on my face came from raising children, working hard, living fully***

**Q2: *Have you ever thought differently about them?***

**A2:** Honestly, no—not really. I had always seen them as something I needed to cover up. But when you asked me this, I started thinking more carefully. My daughter always says, "Mum, when you smile, your eyes bloom like a flower." And every time she says it, I never quite know if I should laugh or cry. It's sweet, but also a reminder that something is changing. Maybe there's another way to look at it. Nobody escapes ageing—we all carry time on our faces. I'm starting to wonder if these lines are not flaws, but stories. Maybe even gifts.

**Q3: *What did you feel when you saw your eye wrinkles in the artwork?***

**A3:** I was nervous, honestly. The photo showed more detail than I expected—especially when I laughed. We don't usually know what we look like when we're laughing unless someone captures it. And there it was. I looked at the image and thought, this is not how I see myself in the mirror. It was raw, unfiltered. But also...

strangely beautiful. It was just me. This moment. Maybe five years from now, my face will look different. But this version—it's still me. Still real. I guess that was the strange part. It felt honest. And I appreciated that honesty.

**Q4: How did you feel after participating in this project?**

**A4:** Like I wasn't just ageing I was becoming something else too. I started to think less about what I had lost and more about what these lines represented. Experiences, emotions, things I've been through. The project gave me a new lens.

**Q5: Would you share these images publicly?**

**A5:** I'm still unsure. There's a vulnerability in showing yourself like that. But I feel less ashamed. That's already a big step. Maybe someday, yes. Not because I think I look great, but because I've come to value what those wrinkles actually mean.

### **Participant E – Master Li, Traditional Lacquer Craftsman (2023)**

**Interview Format:** Face-to-face interview

**Date:** 3 August 2023

**Location:** Chengdu, Sichuan

**Language:** Chinese (translated to English with permission)

**Interviewer:** Jing Guo

**Interviewee:** Master Li (senior craftsman with over 30 years of experience in traditional Chinese lacquerware)

**Q1: What is your view on surface quality in lacquer?**

**A1:** Smoothness is everything. That is the first thing we check. A good lacquer surface must be even, no bubbles, no cracks. If you cannot achieve that, then you start over. ***If the layer is cracked or peels, you should start again. That is not something to show.***

**Q2: How do you feel about younger artists who use lacquer in more experimental ways?**

**A2:** I am not against trying new things. But you must understand the tradition first. If you skip the basics, the work will not last. Young people sometimes focus too much on ideas and forget the craft. Lacquer is slow, it needs patience and respect. I can see the energy and the creativity, and I admire that. But I worry sometimes. Some of

them do not really understand lacquer before they start bending the rules. Lacquer is not just paint. It has a temper, you know. If you rush it or treat it like modern materials, it won't behave. I tell young people; it is like raising a child. You cannot just throw new clothes on it and say it's grown. You have to know its nature first.

**Q3: *What was your reaction when you saw my wrinkled lacquer surfaces?***

**A3:** Honestly? My first thought was, oh no, she's going to have to sand all that down. I was ready to hand you some polishing paper. But then you told me it was on purpose, and I had to look at it again. It still goes against my habit, you know. We are trained to make it smooth, flawless. But when I looked closer, I could see that maybe you were trying to say something with those lines. Not mistake, but message. I'm not sure I would call it lacquer in the old sense, but it did make me think differently.

**Q4: *Do you think lacquer should evolve with time?***

**A4:** I think it is already changing. Even during my lifetime, things have shifted. But it is not something that should change just to chase trends. The strength of lacquer is in its slowness, its patience. It is different from oil paint or ink. Some things about it are sacred, I feel. Still, I know the world is changing. As long as people treat lacquer with respect, I think there is room for it to grow in new ways.

**Q5: *Would you teach a student who wants to mix lacquer with textiles or use it abstractly?***





**A5:** Of course I would. But first, I would teach them the basics. You have to know how to walk before you try to dance. Once you understand how lacquer works, how it breathes and ages, then maybe you can start mixing it with other things. But you cannot skip the foundation. ***Tradition is not a museum. It is a root. You don't pull it out to plant something new. You grow from it.***

## Appendix F: Studio Process Documentation

This appendix provides visual documentation of the key stages in the making process discussed in Section 5.6. Each figure is annotated with a description of the materials, techniques, and experimental adjustments involved. These images form an integral part of the reflective and analytical methodology used in this research.

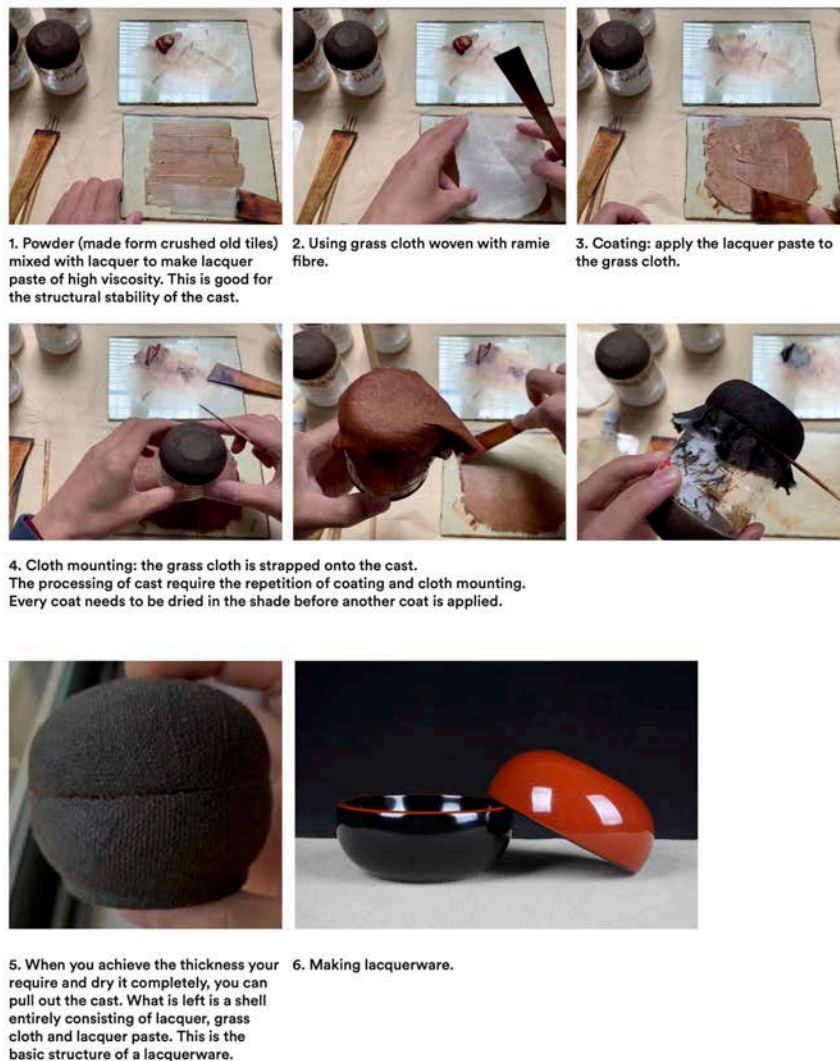
### Figure F1: Material compatibility tests with various substrates

These tests were conducted to evaluate the adhesion behaviour of lacquer on a variety of everyday substrates. Each material exhibits distinct surface properties such as absorbency, texture and porosity, which directly influence how the lacquer settles, bonds and cures. The results offer insight into unconventional applications of lacquer beyond traditional wood or fabric bases and inform future material selection for experimental or mixed-media lacquer work.

|   |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
|                                |                      |                |                |
| <b>Wrinkled Paper</b>   | <b>Tissue</b>   | <b>Cling Film</b>  | <b>Hessian Fabric</b>   |
| <b>Adhesion: Moderate</b>   | <b>Adhesion: Poor</b>   | <b>Adhesion: Very Poor</b>   | <b>Adhesion: Good</b>   |
| <b>Observation:</b><br>The lacquer accumulates in folds, forming thicker patches with thinner areas at the edges. | <b>Observation:</b><br>The lacquer appears faint, absorbed into the surface, lacking gloss or structure | <b>Observation:</b><br>The lacquer floats on the surface, forming uneven ridges or dragging marks. | <b>Observation:</b><br>The lacquer adheres cleanly, with visible brush texture and consistent film. |

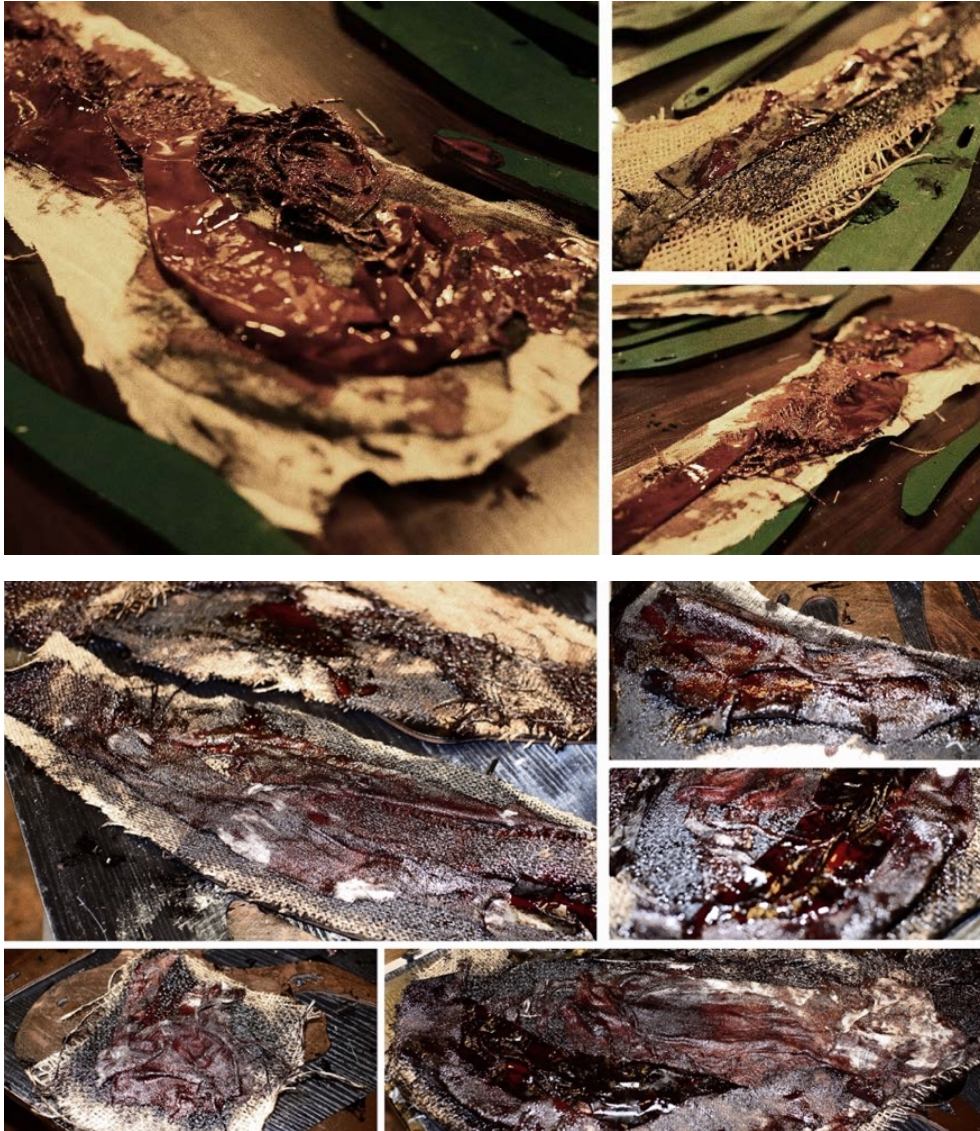
**Figure F2: Traditional cloth mounting (裱布) technique in dry-lacquer (Tatai) construction**

This figure documents the classical cloth mounting method, in which layers of ramie-based grass cloth are coated with lacquer paste and applied over a mould to form the lacquer body. The process emphasises full adhesion, structural buildup through repetition, and the eventual concealment of the cloth beneath the lacquered surface. In contrast, my studio practice deliberately loosened this structure to explore partial exposure and material tension.

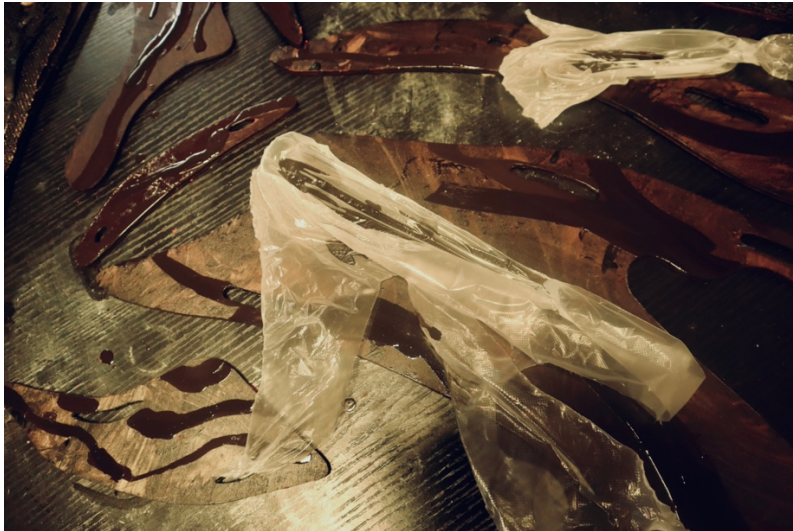


**Figure F3: Loosely mounted material over lacquer panel supports**

Ramie cloth was deliberately mounted without tension, allowing natural folds and irregularities to form. Some areas were intentionally left uncovered to expose the structure beneath, disrupting traditional notions of surface perfection.



**Figure F4: *Cling film applied directly over lacquer surface, forming folds and wrinkles on lacquer panel***

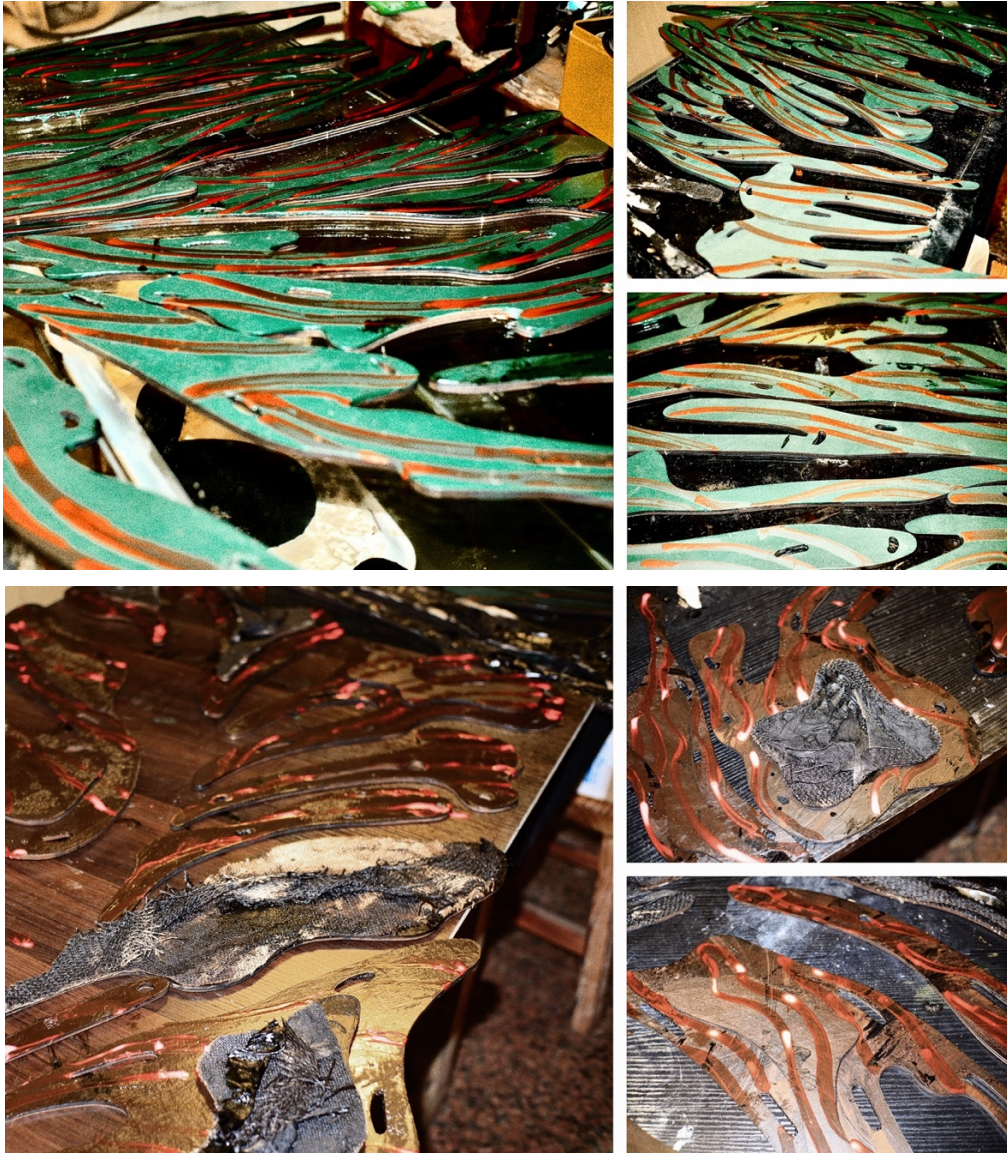


**Figure F5: Composite surface created with paper and hessian fabric in layered mounting**



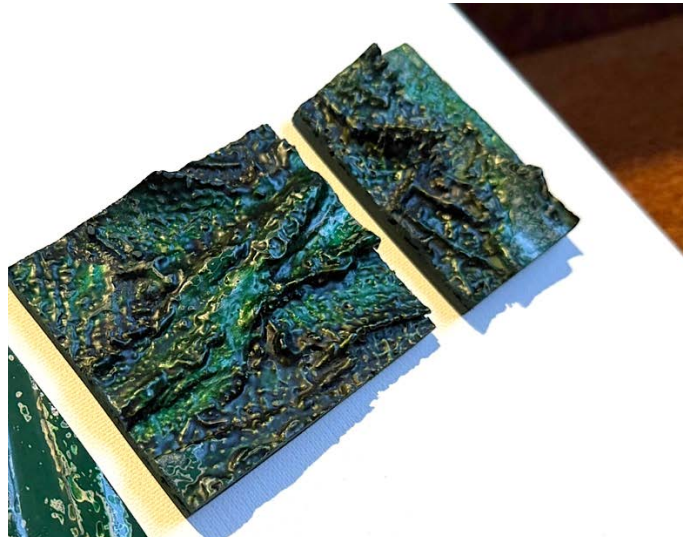
**Figure F6: Linear ridge formations produced by modified Da Nian technique.**

This image shows the outcome of adapted tools and gestures used to create line-like protrusions resembling the folds of human skin.

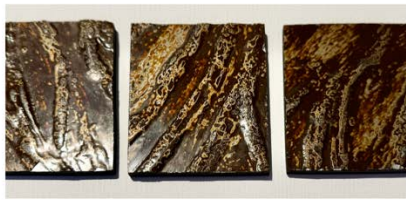


**Fig. F7. *Fabric-induced surface textures emerging from the cloth mounting process***

The visible raised areas result from coarse textiles such as hessian and were preserved during polishing to remain part of the surface topography.



**Fig. F8. Layering structure of lacquer surface without cloth mounting**

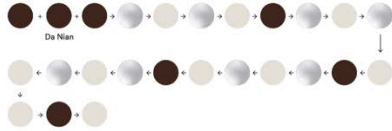


**Colour Selection:**



**Application of Layers:**  
22 layers

**The application of different colours in each layer:**



**Materials Used:**  
Lacquer, wood pane and hemp rope

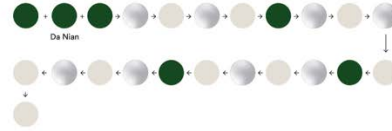


**Colour Selection:**



**Application of Layers:**  
20 layers

**The application of different colours in each layer:**



**Materials Used:**  
Lacquer, wood pane and hemp rope

**Fig. F9. Layering structure of lacquer surface with cloth mounting**

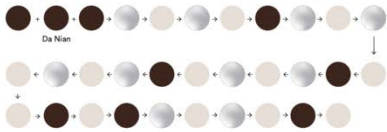


**Colour Selection:**

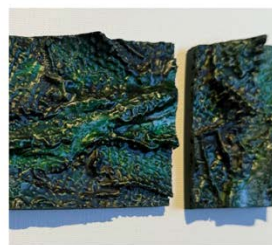


**Application of Layers:**  
29 layers

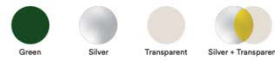
**The application of different colours in each layer:**



**Materials Used:**  
Lacquer, wood pane, hessian fabric

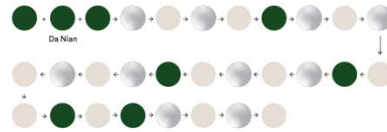


**Colour Selection:**



**Application of Layers:**  
27 layers

**The application of different colours in each layer:**



**Materials Used:**  
Lacquer, wood pane, cotton and hemp rope

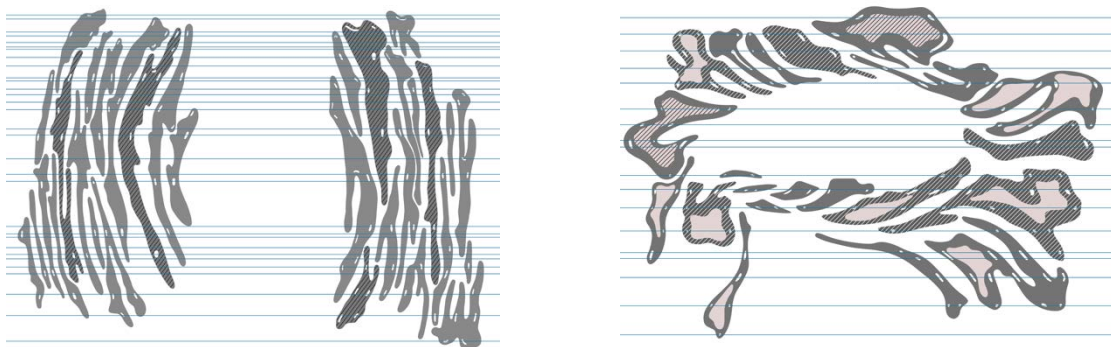
**Fig. F10. *Spraying diluted coloured lacquer onto semi-sized Xuan paper prior to mounting***

A translucent layer of coloured lacquer was sprayed onto the paper surface before it was mounted onto a wooden panel. This formed the visual and structural ground for the final work.

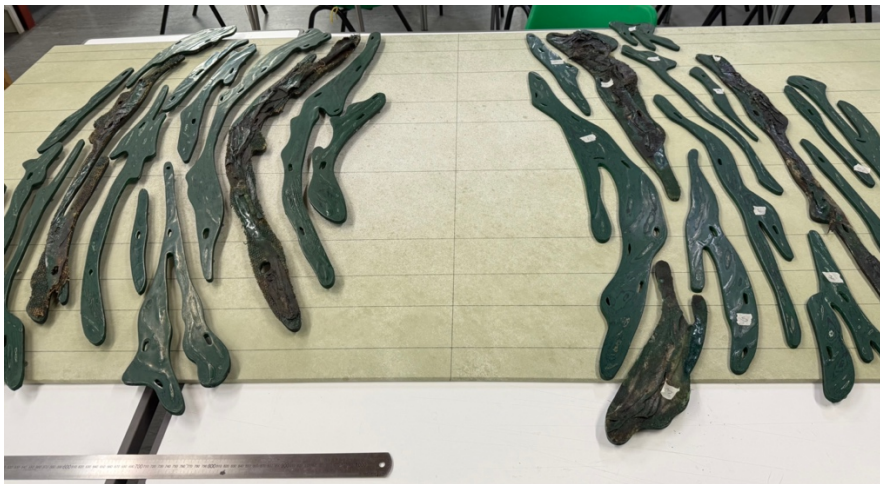


**Fig. F11. *Preliminary sketch with reference lines for full-scale positioning***

The original small-format drawing includes proportional reference lines that guided the transfer of the composition onto the large wooden panel. This sketch served as the spatial blueprint for the final arrangement.



**Fig. F12. *Aligning pre-cut holes in lacquer panels with guidelines***



**Fig. F13. Threading lacquer-coated thread through lacquer panels and final assembly outcome**

