

## *Unveiling and Activating the “Uncertain Heritage” of Chinese Knotting*

Yuxin Yang, Politecnico di Milano, Italy

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### **Abstract**

In the cultural heritage determination processes, something identified and designated as a heritage and important to preserve usually based on the society, the related people, and the natural environment, which guided the documentation and conservation measures. However, in this new industrial society, some of the heritage with hidden and forgotten values seems uncertain to be defined as heritage nor to be guided innovation development. Such as Chinese knotting, even if the craft acknowledges, it has no national definition as a heritage and faces an urgent situation to transform the traditional skill into new terms of practice. Base on this context, design looks promising to lower the craft’s uncertainty through unveiling the potential values and activating the craft with the stakeholders. Thus, the paper using the case of Chinese knotting to discuss what are the parameters to describe traditional craftsmanship’s heritage value in design research, what makes it uncertain, and how design has the potential unveiling and activating the traditional crafts' knowledge and skills.

Keywords: Chinese knotting, Traditional craftsmanship, Textile arts and craft, Uncertain heritage

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## **Introduction**

There is no doubt that in the field of heritage study, design has the potential in defining fresh meanings, visualizing ways to disseminate the heritage, and makes it more accessible in the new society. As part of the intangible cultural heritage, traditional craftsmanship is not only including the tangible evidence but also holding the intangible knowledge and skills values that makes it more complex to preserve and innovate (Lupo & Guinta, 2016). That means, in the design process of saving a traditional craftsmanship, both material artifact and immaterial heritage values should be integrated considered.

According to the case study described on UNESCO document (published in 2005), the preliminary activities of reviving a traditional craft through design method should consider to *1) discover the background knowledge; 2) database compiled on the region, crafts and artisans; 3) explore the possibility of the communities, skills, materials, crafts, product applications, and project structure and approach; 4) Identify a local nongovernmental organization to undertake the responsibility.*

Inspired by this design practice, the research about Chinese knotting start finding the values of this crafts and the uncertainty situation through 1) discover the Chinese knotting's cultural context; 2) evaluate the craft's design-based parameter of heritage values and analyze the uncertain reasons; 3) identify the related craft community; 4) example the promising cases.

## **The name of Chinese Knotting**

*"Few realize the importance that knots and cordage have played in the world's history, but if it had not been for these simple and every-day things, which as a rule are given far too little consideration, the human race could never have developed beyond savages."* This was written by Verrill and McCann in 1944, however, during the 1980s there is a knot art named as the original country, Chinese knot was then well-known in the world. Just like they mentioned, Chinese knots played an important role in Chinese history from the begging of the civilization to the turbulent period of the Republic of China.

The technique of Chinese knots is defined as decorative handicraft art (Chang & Li, 2006) that can be tied using one cord (usually about one meter in length) to make up a knot body with two layers of cords sandwiching empty space; hence, the three-dimensional, symmetrical body is tight enough to stay in shape when suspended. There are more than 14 basic knots under the category of Chinese knot. Every basic knot is named according to its distinctive shape, meaning, and pronunciation. The techniques require the cord intertwined by hands or supported by other auxiliary tools such as needles, hook and soft board. The chosen cord or rope should be flexible and have the appropriate thickness to achieve the desired dimension and figure, whether it knotted as a ritual item for royal temple or an exquisite piece of decorating hang on the small object.

From the early times, knotting was one of the most basic skills to record information and convey messages before people started to write in China. As an art of craftsmanship, Chinese people used knots for fastening traditional garment instead of

the button on or as good luck decorating the traditional Chinese clothing and the interior. Unfortunately, there are only rare examples of prehistoric Chinese knots exist today because of the natural materials used to tie knots and fewer research compared to other crafts related to textile and costume. Moreover, due to the effects of industrialization and the Cultural Revolution in China, the art of Chinese knotting was almost lost with many other traditional crafts and arts. The change begun when the craft and art of macramé became popular in the West during the 1970s, there was a simultaneous revival of interest in Chinese knots radiation from Taiwan to Mainland China (Chen, 2007).

It was not named as Chinese knotting before Xiasheng Chen's research. In the 1980s, Xiasheng Chen (English named as Lydia Chen, funded the Chinese knotting Promotion Centre) cooperated with Echo magazine sought out the few remaining keepers of the knotting tradition and recorded their work in a series of articles and books. She named these knotting crafts as Chinese knots and assembling practical manuals to disseminate the art of Chinese knotting to a broader audience (Chen, 2007).

### **The Evolution of Knotting in China**

Through the Chinese history, we can find many clues from documents such as historical records and poetry, and cultural relics such as stone carving and painting that were mentioned or even directly described knots. In this paper, the author arranged the evolution of knotting in China as five periods.

1. The first period is before 476 BCE. Similar like Inca Quipu, the knots were as recording and rule method of Chinese ancient times. According to 'Zhouyi·Xici' (周易·系辞下)<sup>1</sup>, the initiate of 'The Book of Change' (易经) was from the ancient times of *Baoxi* era which period using knots to record and govern the community.<sup>2</sup> In a commentary by an early scholar Xuan Zheng, on the annotated edition of 'The Book of Changes', he said that 'Big events were recorded with complicated knots, and small events were recorded with simple knots.' Moreover, the chapter of *Tubo* in the 'New Book of Tang' (A.D. 960 - 1127) recorded that 'the government makes the agreement by tie cords due to lack of writing'. According to Chen's research, the only artifact evidence of using knots to record is on a *high stem small square pot* in Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BCE), now displayed in Shanxi Museum.

2. In the second period, instead of using knot as a tool for recording or ruling method, knots became an ancient totem before the CE 220. In the ancient time, Chinese people with a wealth of imagination on the auspicious things brought knots a lot of good meanings from the pictograms, quasi-sound, to the totem worship. For example, the double coin knots painting on the T-shape fabric discovered by archaeologists in *Zhui Xin's tomb* (206 BCE – CE 9). The pattern is in the form of intertwined dragons and the intertwined ancient deities *Fuxi* 伏羲 and *Nüwa* 女娲. (it now displayed in Hunan

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<sup>1</sup>Xici (系辞) or Zhouyi·Xici (周易·系辞), Pre-Qin Confucian Epistemology and Methodology, an edition that summarized the The Book of Changes' meaning

<sup>2</sup>上古结绳而治，后世圣人易之以书契: In the remotest antiquity, the government was carried on successfully by the use of knotted cords (to preserve the memory of things). In subsequent ages, the sages substituted written character and bonds for them.

Provincial Museum). Furthermore, *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* are also the initiator of marriage in China which brings the double coin knot an extended meaning, the knot of love.

3. The decorative function of Chinese knots gradually became a distinctive decorative art in China, deriving the third period of *Lao Zi* 络子 culture. The word *Lao* 络 is the ancient appellation in China of the knot, and it was a tradition to tie a knot at the waist by silk or cotton ribbon. It peaked during the Sui and Tang Dynasties (581-906), when numbers basic knots, such as Sauvastika and Round brocade, generated the *Lao zi* vogue on the garments and the common folk art in the palace and home. Thus, knots were cherished not only as symbols but also as an essential part of everyday life to decorate and express thoughts and feelings.

In the traditional wedding custom, a Concentric knot<sup>3</sup> 同心结 or the knot made like a Concentric knot was necessary to be held by the bride and groom (Meng, 1127; Wu, 1274). As a result, the love-based knot is a unique element in many of the poem, novel, and painting. In the possible resources searching, there are 37 ancient poems are mentioned the Concentric knot to portray love (e.g. Binwang Luo: *'Knot the ribbon as the Concentric knot, interlock the love as the clothes'*, poem in Tang Dynasty), 43 ancient poems applied the knot with silk/cotton ribbon (e.g. Tingjian Huang: *'We had a time knotting together, loving as the ribbon tied'*, poem in Song Dynasty), and 29 ancient poems used the related word 'knot the love' (the most famous one is 'Knotting love' written by Jiao Meng in Tang Dynasty).

In Song and Yuan Dynasties (960-1368), Pan Chang knot, today's most recognizable Chinese knot started popularly. Although there is not much evidence showed the knots adorning everyday objects in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the culture of *Lao Zi* caught a second peak during the period of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). At that time, all basic knots became widely used to grace objects such as Ruyi, sachets, wallets, fan tassels, spectacle cases, and rosaries, in daily use, and extended the single knot technique into complicated knots. According to the famous Chinese classical novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Cao. X, 1791), we can see how the *Lao Zi* culture developed and spread between the middle and higher hierarchy as a love and lucky keepsake in family members, lovers, and friends in Qing Dynasty. During that period, it was also a distinct and honorable craftsmanship studied and created by maids in the Imperial Palace. *"When knotting, the maids amusing for Ci Xi were able to quickly produce objects of various kinds proficient."* (Jin & Shen, 1992) Through the words, this kind of knot technique was similar like macramé which named as Flat knot 平结 or Lark's Head knot 雀头结 now in China.

4. Although the tradition of *Lao Zi* culture declined in the period of the Republic of China, it still impacted the fashion trend from traditional costume to a modern Chinese style. Without intricate and over decorative, the crafts of knotting simplify as few buttons ornament on the Qi Pao (i.e. Cheongsam). In the fourth period, this typical knotting ornament designed for Qi Pao was then named Pan Kou. Until the Cultural Revolution in China, knotting activities were a common part of many women's everyday lives and the artifact that was produced visible in homes and apparels of different social hierarchy.

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<sup>3</sup> Another argument is to call this knot Loopless Buddha knot due to the commonly used in Buddhism.

5. During the recent three decades, after Chen's research of Chinese knotting and the related books disseminated, Chinese knotting became a popular symbol and souvenirs in the festival and commodity market.

### **Chinese knotting as an “*Uncertain heritage*”**

Rely on archaeology, sociology, and ancient art study, although it is hard to dig the tangible prehistory evidence, in the long history of ancient China, it is not hard to find that knotting activities were a common part of many women's everyday lives and the artifact that was produced visible in homes and apparels of different social hierarchy.

However, this craft is in a dubious situation in current society. On the one hand, Chinese knot is one of the most famous symbols of China which makes it popular in design to illustrate something traditional and/or typical Chinese, such as the logo of China Unicom. Due to the cheap price in the market, it is also a favorable gift for people to convey lucky meanings. On the other hand, the use of Chinese knotting seems locking in the decoration function. Simultaneously, the shapes and techniques are less innovating in both knotting craft community and design practices. As a result, even though Chinese knotting had a flourishing history and recognizable all over the world, it is still a craftsmanship being neglected by Chinese and low price in the market.

When something holds the heritage characters but seems not sufficient to regarded as a heritage item, a definition of “Uncertain heritage” could be used to describe this kind of thing. The topic “Uncertain heritage” is firstly introduced by Swedish scholars to describe the objects and phenomena that are new in the cultural context or remain in an uncertain position (i.e. to be undervalued or invisible). Chinese knotting, since it is acknowledged craft without national confirm as a heritage, could be described as an “uncertain heritage”. But what makes it uncertain is still not clear. In this research, it is necessary to unveiling the certain and uncertain heritage values to understand the opportunities and challenges for activating this kind of crafts.

The basic parameters to evaluate something is heritage or not are usually the cultural context, social impact, geographical reason, and temporal span. In craft and design fields, craftspeople and designers are both paying attention in the aesthetic value no matter the traditional beauty of the craft or the new form aesthetic.

In the UNESCO case, “*revitalizing a craft tradition includes skill upgrading, documentation, and revival of traditional motifs, designs, and techniques; introduction of new kinds of raw material; adoption of principles of costing, quality control, and production planning; and the introduction of effective marketing and promotional strategies.*”. It seems that activating a craft is more like reuse the craft as the commodity. The economic intervention is effective for reviving traditional craftsmanship, but for some traditional crafts like Chinese knotting are still underdeveloped in the market. In spite of that, economic value is necessary for stimulating craftspeople's creative power. It is valuable when the craft is handmade or even more, can only be made by hand. To update a craft's knowledge and skill, the technique is an essential parameter, not only the skill by hand, but also the extendable capability of the craft. Moreover, new digital and technology are leading the development of our society nowadays, to think about a craft's intellectual possibility

can also help us searching a way to transform the traditional knowledge into new terms of practices.

To sum up, all the essential parameters to measure a craft whether heritage or uncertain heritage in design research, that are Cultural, Social, Geographical, Temporal, Economic, Aesthetic, Technical, and Intellectual. In this way, we can discuss separately the issue of what makes Chinese knotting uncertainty.

**The cultural:** No matter the use of recording information in ancient time or the *Lao Zi* culture, there is no doubt to say Chinese knotting has the certain cultural value. Despite lots of the evidence is second-hand from sculpture, stone carving, paintings, and poetry. The main reason that Chinese look down this crafts is a historical issue that since the Imperial China period, Chinese believing 'the philosophy is the way, and all others are just tools', and this is still affecting today.

**The social:** Combine the cultural value, Chinese knotting was an essential part of people's everyday life for decorating and express thoughts and feelings. However, after late modern age, traditional craftsmanship in China did not come to be impacted by the "Arts and crafts movement" between 1880 and 1920. And many traditional culture, artifacts, and activities suffered devastating damage, as they were thought to be at the root of "old ways of thinking" during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 until 1976. Its social value declined as the change in contemporary society.

**The geographical:** During the research of Chinese knot, there is no archaeologist clear-cut the craft's origin location in China. The craftsmanship more like an activity spontaneous developing in many places in China. The precise origin is a crucial element to confirm a craftsmanship as a heritage in national and international scales, although Chinese knotting had been defined as the intangible cultural heritage of Xicheng District in Beijing in 2012, due to the craftspeople's unremitting efforts.

**The Temporal:** To consider the passing time, knotting technique can trace back to prehistoric times. But The earlier decorative knot-making tradition in China needs to be further explored.

**The Economic:** It is not clear that the Chinese knotting had much economical value before Qing Dynasty, but the knots made by Imperial palace maid were considered as higher crafts that more expensive than other textile arts and crafts (Jin & Shen, 1992). The uncertainty connected to Chinese knotting in a heritage context is mainly about the effects of after 1978 the policy of Chinese economic reform, Chinese manufacturing is impacted by industrial production and mass-produce, craft by hand can no longer be effective survival skills. Moreover, connotation to cheap and synthetic material and unprofessional careless work for quick money causes the embarrassingly low price status when people consider about Chinese knots now.

**The aesthetic:** The appearance of Chinese knots conform to Chinese symmetrical aesthetic, and the using colours also considered to the Chinese Five elements (五行). It did (especially the symmetric red Pan Chang knot) serve as the icon that arouses the association expected of China and Chinese, but the knots very often used in the similar form of expression tradition and "Chinese" in film, theatre or traditional festive. In addition, as a result of economic and historical perspective emerging the

craftspeople making without thinking, as well as the amateurs who are interested in study Chinese knotting, are less creativity in broke the traditional aesthetic.

**The technical:** The knotting techniques preferred were those considered to be 'traditional' and 'authentic'. Base on the 14 basic Chinese knotting techniques summarized by Chen, the knots can be mix-and-matched as a new pattern of knot (with or without the three-dimensional structure). Furthermore, the craftspeople who famous in this craftsmanship is developing new technique regarding the traditional knowledge. But many of the knots are not easy to practice by only hands or even supply for other auxiliary working. One little mistake could cause failure when knotting a typical Chinese knot in progress. Besides, with the “over” traditional cogitation, the prevalent meaning-making aspect of Chinese knots can be annoying and problematic for changing the shape and use, even though remaining the technique and handmade procedure.

**The intellectual:** As the world moves into the 21st century, heritage, as well as the traditional craftsmanship, are meeting the needs of technological affecting. This means the intellectual value should also be considered as one resilient element for activating the craft. There is few practices Chinese knotting through digital or smart technology, but the people who interested in this craft are actively sharing their thoughts and knowledge on the digital platform no matter the millennial generation or the 40s.

### **Activating knotting crafts**

In the process of activating traditional craftsmanship, designers and artists are considering as a bridge between the craftspeople’s know-how and their knowledge of how to innovate/vision the craft. Design and art activities can stimulate the craft in various aspects, for example, artistic vision of exhibiting the craft, cultural intensive product lines, and embed appropriate technologies.

#### Design and Art approach

Chinese knots imply variety meanings including Chinese, Asian style, traditional, and tourist are experienced as narrow and fixed, the crafts are also charged with meanings that can indeed be used in artistic creation.

Different from the situation in China, knotting arts and crafts have been more mature developing in Japan and Korea. There are several contemporary knots cases in Japan and Korea indicate that traditional knotting, as well as contemporary art and design, could all blend together interpret into a fresh term of Asian arts and products.

One of the good example is the collection “BIG RED KNOTS” created by the textile artist Yuni Kim Lang, who was born in Korea and brought up in China. She inspired from Chinese knots, using her contemporary artistic taste transform the knot art as the new accessory design and visual art. This example shows that how design and art transform the Chinese knotting into contemporary visual art. The designer/artist using the modern style interpret the aesthetic figure and the red stereotype knot into new art of craftsmanship.

In fashion and accessory design process, knotting is more like a technique than cultural product. However, today's consumption is not only the simple possession of a specific product, but the experience and the background story are the values that the customer willing to find within the artefact. In the process of designing the knotting craft, another example is to interpret the knots within the cultural ritual. The culture of worship in *jinja*, or shrine is Japanese indigenous religion from a long time ago. Omamori as one kind of luck charms can be easily found in a shrine which always tied a traditional knot on it. Base on this shrine culture and the culture of knotting love, the Kawagoe Hikawa shrine<sup>4</sup> set up a knotting theme café named Musubi<sup>5</sup> Café. In this café, you can find different knotting products and Omamori for good marriage and lovers' happiness. Although the café provides a lot of Western cuisine, believers and tourists can immerse in the Asian traditional culture from the logo design to the end products. The latest knot design and the related storyboard are also presenting on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, to keep a long-term dissemination and promotion to the world.

### Technological approach

Except practicing knots in the design and art fields, there are, also practitioners who treat the technique and structure of Chinese knotting in a technology approach. Neglect the authentic value of hand-making, Andrew Lee and Brandon M. Wang who studied Computer Science Division in University of California designed a program called Knotty, 'a method for the automatic generation of a single-string Chinese-style knot that resembles an arbitrary input 3D model'. Furthermore, as the traditional Chinese knots have the sequence, another hypothesis of produce Chinese knots is parametric design.

While we considering the Hi-tech knotting products, cultural and social values seem less important than the value of the craft's technique. As the trend of new technology influences our society, craft's technique can provide innovative thinking and the new way to reuse the traditional technique in other ambits.

### Sharing community approach

Even though, Chinese knotting as a traditional craft has many uncertainties, people who love this craft spontaneous organized a non-governmental organization in China together with experts and amateurs. Affected by Chen's work, the group-member of knotting experts and amateurs in Chinese knotting radiate from Taiwan to Mainland. Except the initiator located in Taiwan, the fellowship also flourishing clustered in Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Liaoning Province, Hebei Province, Jiangsu Province, Zhejiang Province, Guangdong Province, Chengdu Province, Xi'an Province in Mainland of China and also abroad. They gather together to create the biggest online website (<http://www.zhongguojie.org/>) including smartphone application and a new media subscription in Wechat. The platforms containing almost all the information about Chinese knotting and projects related to knot work. Until now, the number of the registered member on this website is 705,332. With digital platforms, the group of

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<sup>4</sup> It is located in Tokyo known as a 'love shrine'.

<sup>5</sup> The Japanese god of love and marriage, also known as Musubi-no-Kami. Coordinate terms: Red Thread of Fate.

knotting craft is highly consociated by sharing each other's knotting experiences and honored the origin cultural of knotting arts.

The website gives the communicating opportunity by performing every amateur's and master's knots work. It sets with a cultural modular that sharing the uncovered knotting history in China and newly discovered artifact evidence from different museum and collection all over the world, an education part for studying traditional and newer knotting skills, a transaction area that can purchase tools, raw materials and finished knotting products. Surprisingly, there is also a section for examining authentic Chinese knotting skills with the meticulous procedure of grading audit by this non-governmental board on the website.

Reference to "Chinese knotting grading assessment model" in Taiwan, the assessment procedure in Mainland separate in three different ways to submit the appropriate application according to the level. The assessment procedure is followed as the flowchart (Chart 1) and people who pass the tests can be officially recorded on the database and as an authenticated Chinese knotting craftspeople active on this website.

1) If you call for a primary level attest, you should submit the Chinese knot object made by yourself as the required topic through the coordinator of local fellowship, or directly on the concrete part of the website or deliver to the central jury. 2) After you acquired the primary certificate, one can be accessed applying the middle level attest by also the same way as primary level. 3) However, the high-level certificate can only be applied by mail to the central jury and the qualification must be the one who has already gain the last two level's certificates.

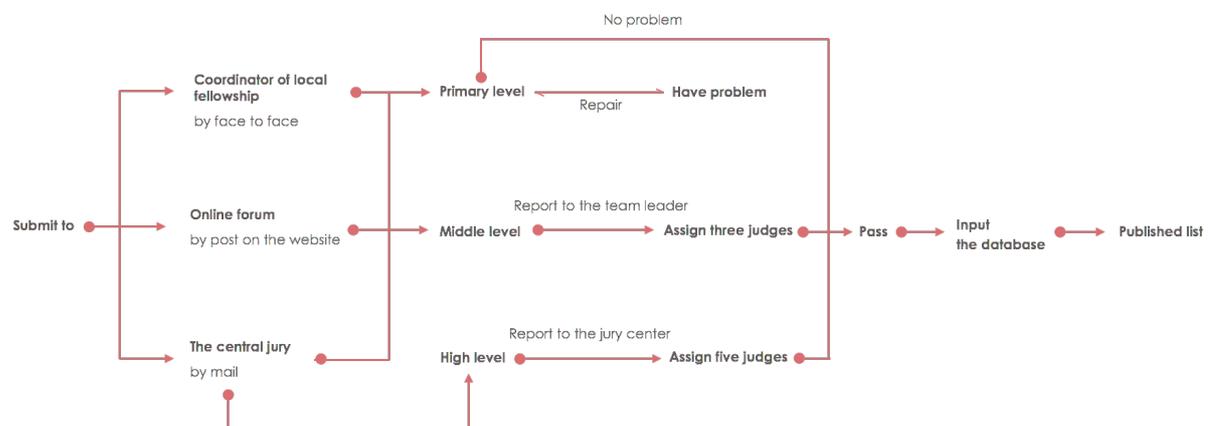


Chart 1: The assessment procedure summarized and translated from the website

Due to the Chinese knotting master Li Ting and other members' efforts, in 2012, Beijing Xicheng District announced that Chinese knotting is an intangible cultural heritage in this district.

## Conclusion

Chinese knotting is a traditional craftsmanship with a long history and culture, as the cultural gap and the scattered origin craft community in China, it is difficult to define as part of the intangible cultural heritage in national and international scales. Besides, in the Mainland China, Craftspeople depressed their imagination by the traditional

notion which makes them lack of creativity and the spirit of broke tradition. However, in the practicing and remaining the authentic handmade technique, there are also lots positive values worth other textile arts and crafts to learn, for example, craftspeople actively sharing their knowledge on the digital platforms, the authentic technique assessment system, and the experiment of new knot pattern. As a result, Chinese knotting knowledge is widely spread in China in these few years.

Today knotting as new technology and creative expression has received a boost that helped to unlock the traditional thinking of using and enjoying knotting. In conclusion, Chinese knotting is a good example to describe one kind of “uncertain heritage” craft. It is important for designers to consider about how to reuse the origin context, how to involve more stakeholders, how to perform a traditional craft, and how to transform the craft’s “negative” point into the positive situation.

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**Contact email:** [yuxin.yang@polimi.it](mailto:yuxin.yang@polimi.it)