Research Article

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# Blessings in Blue and White: An Iconological Study of Blue Jiaxie Bridal Textiles

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## Abstract

Blue Jiaxie, an indigo clamp resist dyeing tradition in southern Zhejiang, China, combines opera imagery and auspicious motifs on bridal textiles. Although previous studies have documented its techniques and symbolic meanings, the relationship between pictorial organisation and marriage customs remains insufficiently explored. This study applies Panofsky's iconological framework to examine how material form, motif combinations and bridal use shape interpretation. Qualitative analysis draws on selected textile images and published technical, ethnographic and visual studies. Preiconographic description examines production, colour, motif features and composition. Iconographic analysis identifies human figures, animals, plants and geometric patterns through their attributes and documented associations. Iconological interpretation situates these subjects within regional wedding customs, opera traditions, popular beliefs and agrarian life. The findings suggest that central scenes, subsidiary motifs and borders jointly express wishes for marital harmony, descendants, prosperity and protection. Bridal use connects familiar theatrical and religious subjects with expectations concerning family life, while craft processes shape their visual presentation. Blue Jiaxie thus functions as a vernacular pictorial medium linking regional narratives with domestic aspirations. By connecting visual analysis with social context, the study contributes to understanding the cultural significance of traditional textiles and provides a basis for their heritage interpretation, documentation and informed design adaptation.


**Keywords:** Blue Jiaxie; Iconology; Opera imagery; Marriage customs; Textile heritage.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Blue Jiaxie is an indigo clamp resist dyeing tradition associated with bridal quilt covers and household furnishings in southern Zhejiang, China. Its indigo ground and reserved white motifs are produced by clamping folded cloth between carved wooden boards before dyeing. Workshop research documents the interdependence of carving, cloth preparation and dyeing in the formation of these patterns [1, 2]. The national heritage record identifies Wenzhou and its surrounding region as an important centre of the surviving tradition and connects its theatrical and auspicious imagery with historical marriage customs [3]. Blue Jiaxie therefore offers material for examining how a regional craft brings familiar stories and blessings into domestic life. Its significance for visual research concerns the relationship between how an image is made, what it depicts and the social occasion for which the cloth is used.

The combination of opera scenes and auspicious imagery presents a particular interpretive problem. Studies of Chinese visual culture show that narrative pictures circulated across paintings, prints, ceramics, furnishings and dress, with meanings shaped by their settings and audiences [4, 5]. Silberstein [6, 7] relates narrative embroidery to theatrical performance, printed imagery and commercial production, demonstrating that figures on cloth warrant attention to both stories and the textile economy. Research on auspicious art identifies conventional associations among images of children, plants, animals and blessings [8], while Andrew's study of textile communication connects material objects with the production of meaning [9], while Bray examines domestic technologies and their relationship with gender and social organisation [10]. These perspectives invite a closer examination of Blue Jiaxie as a bridal textile. A theatrical encounter, a group of children and a floral border may retain distinct associations while contributing to a shared occasion of use. The question is how their arrangement makes those associations relevant to marriage and the anticipated life of a household.

Existing research on Blue Jiaxie provides substantial foundations for addressing this question. Historical and technical studies document workshop knowledge, regional customs and the identification of theatrical repertoires, while pattern collections preserve examples for visual comparison [1, 2, 11–13]. Recent technical research extends this knowledge through a kinetic model of dye movement and cloth coloration within Jiaxie printing blocks [14]. Aesthetic and interpretive studies examine restrained colour, compositional organisation, vernacular ideas of making and symbolic associations [15–18]. A further strand concerns contemporary application: Xu et al. [19] explore Blue Jiaxie elements in knitwear, and Wu and Fan [20] combine extension semantics with fuzzy comprehensive evaluation in pattern innovation. Yang et al. [21] discuss the reconstruction of historical, cultural, artistic and social values in the craft's contemporary revitalisation. These strands establish that research already extends beyond technical preservation to cultural meaning and design. Their differing purposes also make it necessary to distinguish the identification of a motif, the interpretation of its historical setting and the evaluation of a contemporary adaptation.

The interpretive task is to make the connections among these forms of knowledge more explicit. Blue Jiaxie scholarship already links imagery with theatre, auspicious wishes and household custom [11, 12, 17]. What warrants closer examination is the evidential sequence through which visible arrangements support a subject identification, and that identification supports an interpretation of bridal use. The presence of an auspicious subject establishes a conventional association; its contribution to a particular textile also depends on framing, accompanying motifs and the occasion of use. The importance of such relationships is consistent with scholarship on narrative textiles and the changing social contexts of objects [6, 22, 23]. The present study concentrates on these relationships across selected examples. It asks how material organisation and motif combinations orient familiar imagery towards marriage and family aspirations, while keeping uncertain narrative identities open to revision.

Panofsky's [24, 25] iconological framework offers an analytical structure suited to this task. Preiconographic description addresses visible forms and arrangements; iconographic analysis identifies conventional subjects; iconological interpretation relates those subjects to their historical and cultural circumstances. This progression allows the analysis to distinguish an observed pictorial feature from a learned identification and a contextual inference. Wahidiyat and Carollina examine the visual appearance of Ondel-ondel through iconography and iconology [26]. Budi and Susilo interpret the symbolic qualities of Javanese punakawan figures [27]. Zhou and Shaik Hussain combine Panofskian interpretation with semiotic analysis of Huaiyang Nini Dog motifs [28]. Together, these applications demonstrate the continuing use of structured interpretation in vernacular art research. These studies offer methodological comparisons. Explanations of Blue Jiaxie must draw on its own workshop traditions, theatrical sources and documented domestic uses. In this setting, iconology can connect technical and subject research with an account of why different images become meaningful together on bridal cloth.

This study accordingly investigates how opera and auspicious imagery are organised and interpreted in Blue Jiaxie bridal textiles from southern Zhejiang. It addresses three questions. What material and compositional features organise the selected images? Which subjects and conventional meanings can be identified through visible attributes and documentary comparison? How do the relationships among these subjects and documented bridal use support interpretations concerning marital harmony, family continuity and social recognition? A qualitative analysis combines close visual examination

with published technical, ethnographic and art historical sources. The contribution is a contextual explanation of how patterned cloth brings distinct subjects into a shared domestic setting, supported by a clear distinction among observation, identification and interpretation. The findings also inform heritage documentation by identifying the visual relationships and attribution evidence that should accompany records of individual motifs.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design to examine opera and auspicious imagery in Blue Jiaxie bridal textiles from southern Zhejiang, China. Panofsky's [24, 25] framework structures the investigation through preiconographic description, iconographic analysis and iconological interpretation. These stages connect visible forms with conventional subjects and their historical significance. Recent research on vernacular art provides a methodological comparison for applying this framework to folk motifs [28].

The principal unit of analysis is the scene or framed panel. Figures, objects and ornaments are examined within their visible compositional relationships. Where complete textile arrangements are documented, the analysis also considers repetition, orientation and the distribution of panels. This approach relates motif interpretation to material form and use, drawing on visual methodology and research on narrative textiles [6, 29]. The study uses existing images and published scholarship; it does not include new interviews or field observation.

### 2.2. DATA SOURCES

The study combines visual materials with technical, ethnographic and art historical literature. The principal visual examples are presented in Figures 3–7: a scene attributed to The Romance of the West Chamber, Bai Tuanyuan, Baizi Tu, auspicious figures, and animal and plant motifs. Geometric ornament is examined where visible within panels and through comparison with published pattern collections. These materials are selected for their legibility, coverage of the subjects examined and relevance to documented bridal use. Documentary sources perform three complementary functions. Technical and ethnographic accounts establish the craft's production processes and household settings [1, 2, 11]. Blue Jiaxie studies and pattern collections support the comparison of theatrical subjects, compositional arrangements and conventional motif combinations [12, 13]. Research on Chinese auspicious imagery and narrative textiles provides comparative evidence for recognising attributes and understanding the circulation of stories across performance and cloth [6, 8]. Visual observations are assessed alongside these sources. This combination makes the basis of interpretation explicit while preserving distinctions between an observed feature, a conventional association and a contextual explanation [29].

### 2.3. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The analysis proceeds through three interpretive stages, followed by synthesis, as summarised in Figure 1. Each stage addresses a distinct question while allowing interpretations to be reconsidered through comparison with visual and documentary evidence.

First, preiconographic description establishes the visible organisation of each example. Attention is given to indigo and reserved white areas, contours, figure number and posture, framing, symmetry, repetition, and the placement of principal and subsidiary motifs. Technical accounts help explain how carving, clamping and dye circulation contribute to these features [1, 2]. Descriptions of appearance are distinguished from explanations of production and symbolic meaning.

Second, iconographic analysis identifies subjects and conventional meanings. Costumes, gestures, accessories, companion figures and spatial relationships are compared with Blue Jiaxie catalogues, theatrical studies and references on auspicious imagery [8, 12, 13]. Recognition depends on combinations of attributes. The analysis also examines how flowers, animals and geometric ornaments accompany a principal subject. Where attributes do not distinguish a particular play, character or deity, a broader thematic identification is retained. Each interpretation therefore remains connected to observable features and documentary comparison.

Third, iconological interpretation relates the identified subjects to documented cultural settings. The discussion addresses fertility and family continuity, wedding customs and social recognition, regional opera, popular belief, and agrarian knowledge. These themes connect the selected imagery with accounts of bridal exchange, household expectations and regional traditions [2, 11, 15]. Technical literature provides contextual evidence for the relationship between craft practice and natural materials. Finally, synthesis examines how formal arrangements and identified subjects contribute to related aspirations within bridal use.

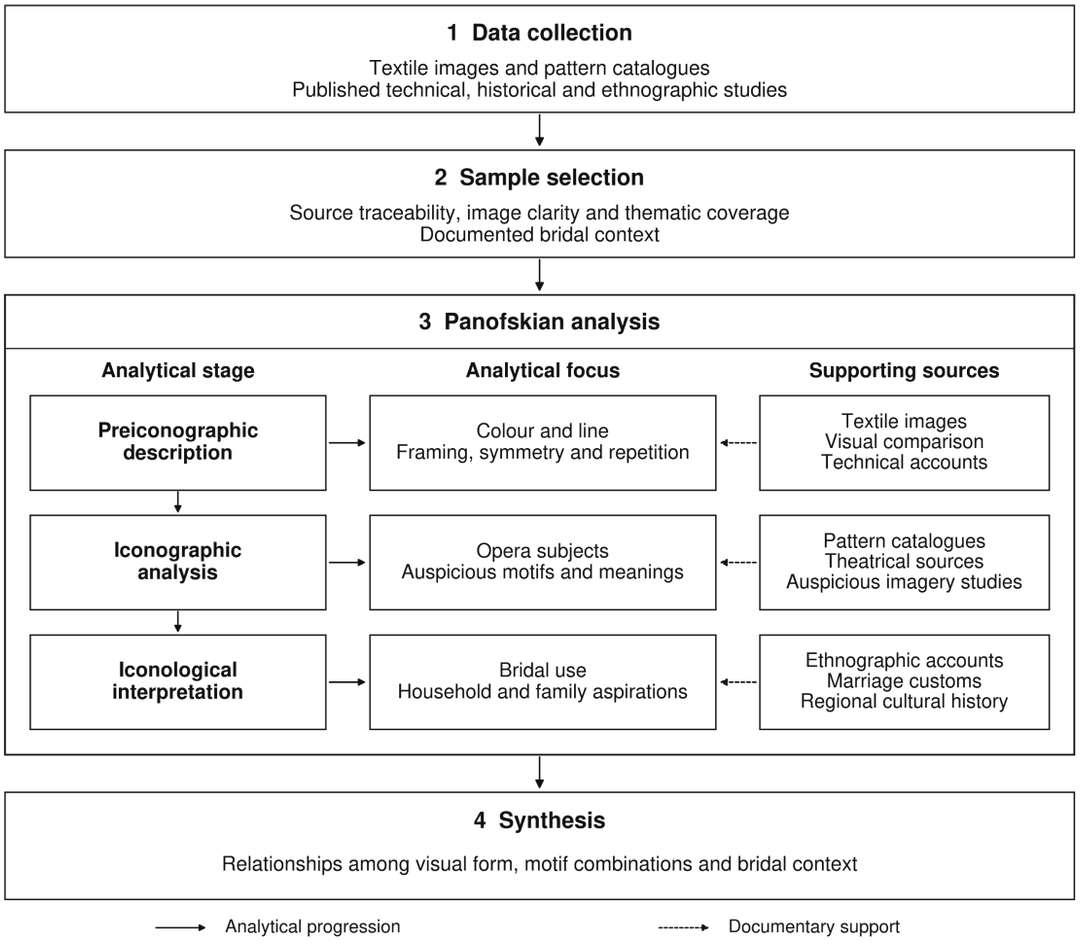



**Figure 1.** *Analytical Procedure of the Study*

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. PREICONOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF BLUE JIAXIE

Preiconographic description establishes the visible forms and material characteristics of an artwork before interpreting its conventional meanings [24]. In southern Zhejiang Blue Jiaxie, these characteristics emerge from the relationship between carved-board dyeing and the practical requirements of household textiles [15, 17]. Four aspects are examined: production processes, colour language, motif characteristics and compositional principles.

Production Processes. Blue Jiaxie production comprises board carving, indigo dye preparation and the clamp-resist dyeing process. Board carving establishes the outlines, internal details and framing structures of the patterns. Hardwoods, including pear, plum and jujube, are selected for their durability and resistance to cracking in humid conditions [16]. The boards combine raised surfaces, which compress the cloth and restrict dye penetration, with recessed channels through which dye reaches exposed fabric [2, 11]. A distinctive feature of the boards is the combination of open grooves and concealed passages. Open grooves distribute dye across recessed areas, whereas concealed passages connect smaller spaces enclosed by raised surfaces [16]. These passages enable dye to reach otherwise isolated details, including those within facial features. Computational research provides evidence of their importance in controlling dye access and reducing the time required for coloration [14]. The carved pattern therefore operates simultaneously as an image and a system for directing dye.

Indigo dye preparation supplies the colourant required for the dye bath. Traditional production uses indigo-bearing plants, which undergo soaking and fermentation before the plant residues are removed. Lime is subsequently added, and the liquid is stirred to promote aeration and pigment formation. After settling, the pigment is collected and filtered to obtain indigo paste for storage and subsequent use [11, 16]. This general sequence is also documented in ethnobotanical research on traditional indigo production elsewhere in China [30]. Preparing the dye bath constitutes a further stage, in which indigo paste is combined with an alkaline solution and undergoes fermentation to establish conditions suitable for dyeing. Plant ash lye may provide the required alkalinity [30]. The preparation and maintenance of the dye bath influence

the depth and consistency of the blue coloration, contributing to the visual distinction between dyed areas and reserved white forms [16].

The clamp-resist dyeing process transfers the carved patterns onto the cloth through repeated immersion in an indigo bath. The cloth is folded and aligned between successive boards, with bamboo strips assisting placement, before the assembled boards are secured within an iron frame using tightening bolts [1, 16]. Torimaru and Hedstrom [1] document a configuration of seventeen boards producing sixteen symmetrical pattern panels. The entire assembly is lowered into the dye bath and subsequently raised to expose the cloth to air. Repeated cycles of immersion and oxidation progressively develop the blue colour, while tightly compressed areas remain undyed [1, 11]. Once dyeing is complete, the frame is loosened and the boards are removed sequentially. The cloth is unfolded, thoroughly rinsed and dried, revealing the characteristic indigo ground and reserved white patterns [1]. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship among carved boards, dye preparation, clamping and the handling of the patterned cloth during production.




**1:** Carved board system
**2:** Indigo dye preparation
**3:** Clamp resist process
**4:** Washing and drying

**Figure 2.** *Production Processes*

Source: Collection from Caicheng Blue Clamp-Resist Dyeing Museum, Wenzhou, China

Colour Language. The colour language of Blue Jiaxie centres on indigo and white. Indigo establishes a continuous chromatic field, while reserved white areas define figures, garments, vegetation and ornamental borders. White results from the compression of cloth between raised board surfaces, which restricts dye penetration [1, 16]. The contrast is therefore inseparable from the production process.

The restricted palette accommodates considerable visual complexity. White functions as an active component of the composition. Its distribution determines the visibility of contours and the relationship between principal imagery and surrounding ornament. Areas of indigo separate adjacent motifs and distinguish densely patterned passages from more open spaces. Larger reserved areas emphasise prominent figures, while smaller repeated forms create rhythm within borders. Visual differentiation depends on contrast, contour and spacing [17]. Previous studies identify this combination of economical coloration and elaborate ornament as a characteristic of Blue Jiaxie aesthetics [15, 18].

Motif Characteristics. Blue Jiaxie motifs comprise two principal groups: opera and auspicious imagery. Drawing on theatrical performance, marriage customs, family life and local beliefs, they combine narrative scenes with subsidiary ornament [11, 16, 18].

Opera motifs. Opera scenes usually occupy the principal pictorial fields, with documented designs arranged in groups of four, eight or twelve panels [16]. Animated postures and interactions convey action, while costumes, accessories and surrounding objects distinguish figures and establish settings. Studies of Yongjia Kunqu and Tie Gong Yuan 铁弓缘 document the theatrical sources of these compositions [31, 32]. Some figures have minimally articulated or blank faces. Where facial details are reduced, costume and posture become particularly prominent, directing attention towards the overall figure and its interaction with others [16].

Auspicious motifs. Common subjects include dragons, phoenixes, deer, bats, carp, lotus flowers, peonies, grapes and bamboo, alongside everyday and seasonal scenes [16, 17]. These motifs often fill borders, corners and spaces around principal scenes, forming floral roundels, flowering branches and continuous decorative bands. Broad outlines, flattened forms and compact internal details create a graphic appearance associated with carved-board dyeing [15, 18]. Their symbolic meanings are examined in the subsequent iconographic analysis.

Compositional Principles. Blue Jiaxie compositions combine bilateral balance, repetition and modular organisation. Symmetry provides an overall framework, although corresponding figures and ornaments may differ in posture or detail.

Repeated forms and alternating areas of density establish rhythm across the patterned surface [15, 16]. Circular, rectangular and octagonal frames organise principal scenes and subsidiary ornament. Main imagery generally occupies the central field, while plants and geometric patterns fill surrounding bands or corners. A vertical axis coordinates the left and right portions of bilaterally organised compositions. These arrangements establish a hierarchy among central imagery, framing structures and subsidiary motifs [16, 17].

At the scale of complete quilt covers, paired inversion provides a further organising principle. A documented arrangement contains sixteen panels distributed in opposing groups, allowing images to appear upright when viewed from either end [17]. Accounts of local bedding customs associate this arrangement with couples sharing a quilt while sleeping at opposite ends [16]. The resulting composition accommodates multiple viewing directions: framing structures individual panels, while repetition and inversion organise the textile as a complete, usable object.

## 3.2. ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF BLUE JIAXIE MOTIFS

Iconographic analysis identifies the conventional subjects, narratives and symbolic associations represented in an image through reference to relevant texts and cultural traditions [24]. In Blue Jiaxie, these subjects draw upon local opera, marriage ceremonies, popular religious beliefs and auspicious imagery [11, 16, 17]. The analysis distinguishes three categories: human figures, animal and plant motifs, and symbolic configurations. Representative examples are examined to establish how recognisable subjects communicate wishes concerning marriage, family continuity and prosperity.

### 3.2.1 Human Figures

Human figures constitute a prominent component of Blue Jiaxie imagery. Their identities and meanings are communicated through combinations of costume, gesture, accompanying objects and narrative setting. Published field research and motif studies associate this repertoire with Kunqu, Yongjia Luantan and other theatrical traditions circulating in southern Zhejiang [11, 18, 32]. Three overlapping groups can be distinguished: opera characters, wedding and children's imagery, and deities or legendary figures (see Table 1).

Opera characters. Opera imagery translates recognisable dramatic episodes into textile compositions. Its interpretation therefore depends on the relationship between the represented figures and the narrative from which they derive. Zhang's [32] study establishes the importance of Yongjia Kunqu within the Blue Jiaxie repertoire, while Guo's [31] analysis of Tie Gong Yuan 铁弓缘 provides a focused example of the relationship between opera narratives and textile motifs.



**Figure 3.** *The Romance of the West Chamber*

Source: Private collection, Qinglan Workshop. Narrative attribution is provisional.

The scene provisionally identified as the reunion in Xi Xiang Ji 西厢记 (The Romance of the West Chamber) (Figure 3) illustrates this relationship. In the reunion narrative, Zhang Sheng's 张生 examination success enables his return and marriage to Cui Yingying 崔莺莺. The bridal headdress and ceremonial clothing associated with Cui Yingying,

together with Zhang Sheng's official attire, connect the couple's union with public recognition and social advancement. The surrounding figures place their relationship within a formal gathering, presenting marriage as an event involving the wider household. The composition condenses the narrative through a limited group of figures, distinctive costumes and ceremonial gestures. This treatment is comparable to the narrative roundels and borders examined by Silberstein [6], whose research demonstrates how Qing dynasty textiles drew upon stories circulating through print and performance. Blue Jiaxie similarly brings theatrical subjects into a domestic textile setting.

Within a bridal quilt cover, the Tuanyuan 团圆, reunion) episode acquires particular relevance. Its resolution brings together fulfilled affection, formal marriage and examination success. The scene can therefore be interpreted as an auspicious parallel to the marriage for which the textile was prepared. This reading is consistent with studies connecting Blue Jiaxie imagery to wedding customs and family aspirations [16, 17]. The significance lies in the correspondence between the selected dramatic outcome and the textile's ceremonial use.



**Figure 4.** *Bai Tuanyuan*

Source: Zhang [33], Chinese Blue Jiaxie, p. 180.

Wedding figures and children at play. Wedding imagery includes bridal couples, ceremonial attendants and figures associated with marriage arrangements. In Bai Tuanyuan 拜团圆 (Figure 4), paired figures in ceremonial dress establish an image of ritual participation. Their coordinated positions and formal presentation support an interpretation centred on matrimonial union [16]. In this context, pairing links the visible organisation of the figures with the conventional wish for a harmonious marriage.

Children's imagery extends this matrimonial theme towards the anticipated continuity of the family. The Baizi Tu 百子图 , or Hundred Boys, examples (Figure 5) depict children individually and in groups, engaged in varied activities. In the illustrated panels, dispersed figures, vegetation and architectural elements create an extensive setting that differs from the more concentrated arrangement of the ceremonial scenes. The significance of these children exceeds the depiction of everyday play. A Qing embroidered hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art associates the Hundred Boys subject with wishes for a prosperous family and records its use in wedding celebrations [34].

This provides a comparative basis for interpreting related imagery on Blue Jiaxie bridal textiles. "Hundred Boys" names an auspicious subject rather than requiring an exact numerical count. Torimaru and Hedstrom [1], for example, document a Blue Jiaxie bridal coverlet whose Baizi Tu design contains ninety-six children. Repetition and multiplicity communicate the desired abundance of descendants. Read alongside wedding imagery, these scenes connect the formation of a marital household with hopes for its future growth [17].

Deities and legendary figures. Blue Jiaxie incorporates figures associated with blessings, longevity and the granting of children, including Magu (麻姑), Zhang Xian ( 张仙), the Longevity Star ( 寿星) and the God of Blessings ( 福星) [17]. Their meanings depend on their respective attributes and conventional associations. Wang's [35] analysis of Chinese folk imagery identifies Magu and the Longevity God with wishes for long life. Zhang Xian, by comparison, is associated with

prayers for male offspring and the protection of children, as documented in the inscription and curatorial interpretation of his portrait in the Princeton University Art Museum [36]. These distinctions help establish the specific wishes represented by different divine figures.

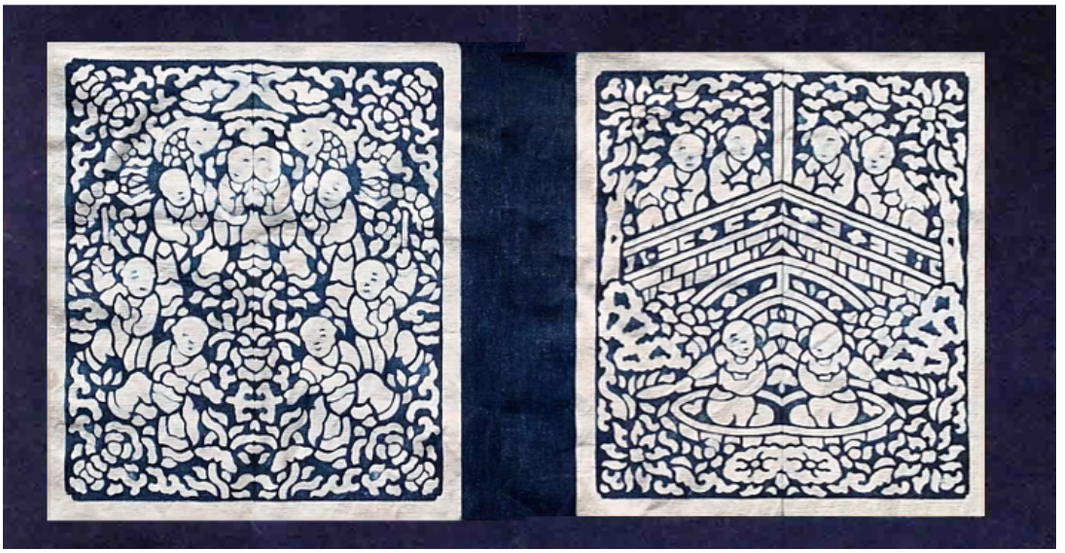


**Figure 5.** *Baizi Tu, or Hundred Boys*

Source description supplied with the manuscript: Blue Jiaxie cotton quilt cover with the "Hundred Boys Reunion" motif, dyed during the Republican period using Qing dynasty carved boards, 184 × 218 cm, pp. 149–155. The publication associated with these page numbers has not been identified.

Hehe Er Xian ( 和合二仙) (The Two Immortals of Harmony and Union) (Figure 6, left) express wishes concerning marriage and family relationships. Lu and Dong [37] demonstrate that Hehe belief encompasses several historical identities and associations, including family reunion, matrimonial harmony and prosperity. The figures should therefore be interpreted through their attributes and the context in which they appear. Wang [35] describes their familiar representation as two youthful figures holding a lotus and a box, and connects this imagery with blessings for newly married couples. Their appearance on a bridal textile supports a reading centred on matrimonial concord, linking a recognised auspicious subject with the intended use of the quilt cover.



**Figure 6.** *The Two Immortals of Harmony and Union (Left) and the Celestial Immortal Delivering a Child (Right)*

Qing dynasty Blue Jiaxie cotton quilt cover with Fu, Lu, Shou and Xi motifs (fortune, official emolument, longevity and happiness), 200 × 230 cm, pp. 117–124 [38].

Tian Xian Song Zi (天仙送子) (The Celestial Immortal Delivering a Child) (Figure 6, right) is interpreted here as an expression of the desire for offspring, although confirmation of the specific divine identity requires additional attribution evidence. This interpretation corresponds with the wider repertoire of child-granting imagery discussed by Wang [35],

in which divine intervention gives visual form to hopes for family continuity. Read alongside the Hehe Er Xian, the subject connects harmonious marriage with anticipated parenthood. Their juxtaposition on bridal textiles can therefore be understood as a coordinated expression of matrimonial fulfilment, the birth of children and familial prosperity.

**Table 1.** *Iconographic Analysis of Human Figures in Blue Jiaxie*

| Category | Representative subjects | Sources | Symbolic meanings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Opera characters | The White Rabbit; The Lute; The Romance of the West Chamber; The Embroidered Jacket | Kunqu, Yongjia Luantan and other local theatrical traditions | Loyalty, filial piety, fidelity and righteousness; ideals of love; social norms |
| Wedding and children's imagery | Wedding ceremony (Bai Tuanyuan); Hundred Boys; matchmaker scenes | Traditional wedding rituals and customs in southern Zhejiang | Marital fulfilment; fertility and numerous sons; gendered moral instruction |
| Deities and legendary figures | Two Immortals of Harmony and Union; Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity; Celestial Immortal Delivering a Child | Popular theatrical performances, blessing rituals and religious observances | Blessings, longevity and well-being; the birth of sons; protection from evil and misfortune |

### 3.2.2 Animal and Plant Motifs

Animal and plant motifs in Blue Jiaxie function as both decorative forms and carriers of conventional meanings. Their symbolic associations arise principally from mythological narratives, phonetic correspondences and the perceived characteristics of particular species. The repertoire documented in Blue Jiaxie includes mythical creatures, familiar animals, flowering plants and fruit-bearing vegetation, arranged within principal fields and subsidiary borders [16, 17] (see Table 2, Figure 7). Their interpretation requires attention to accompanying motifs and compositional relationships, since a single subject may communicate several related wishes.

Among animal motifs, dragons (long, 龙) and phoenixes (feng, 凤) carry associations with elevated status, auspiciousness and power. Other mythical creatures, including the qilin ( 麒麟), belong to a broader repertoire of auspicious beings whose meanings developed through mythology, religious traditions and decorative practice. Hrvatin's [39] study of Chinese musical instruments demonstrates how such creatures communicate culturally established associations across different material forms. This provides a comparative context for examining their appearance in Blue Jiaxie. In addition, phonetic correspondences offer another means of interpreting animal imagery. The bat, fu ( 蝠), evokes blessings through its shared pronunciation with fu ( 福), meaning good fortune, while the deer, lu ( 鹿), can suggest official emolument through its correspondence with lu ( 禄), meaning official salary. Fish, yu ( 鱼), similarly evoke abundance through their association with yu ( 余), meaning surplus [40]. Such correspondences allow recognisable animals to communicate wishes concerning prosperity and social advancement.

Narrative settings can further specify these meanings. A carp approaching or crossing the Dragon Gate evokes examination success and advancement, drawing upon the legend of the carp's transformation into a dragon. Magpies perched on flowering plum branches construct a different visual expression: the bird's association with happiness combines with the correspondence between plum, mei ( 梅), and eyebrows, mei ( 眉), to convey the saying xi shang mei shao ( 喜上眉梢), or happiness reaching the eyebrows. These conventional associations are discussed in the literature on Chinese auspicious imagery [8, 35]. These examples show how actions, positions and accompanying plants contribute to interpretation.

Plant motifs communicate wishes through flowering, fruitfulness, seasonal endurance and established cultural associations. Peonies signify wealth and honour, while pomegranates and grapes express fertility through their numerous seeds or abundant clusters of fruit. Lotus imagery can convey harmonious marriage and hopes for offspring, particularly when seedpods or children accompany the flowers. Pine and cranes are associated with longevity, while bamboo and plum can evoke endurance and moral integrity [35]. The Asian Art Museum's crane ornament provides a further comparative example of the longevity associations attached to bird and floral imagery [41].

**Table 2.** *Iconographic Analysis of Animal and Plant Motifs in Blue Jiaxie*

| Category | Representative motifs | Basis of interpretation | Symbolic meanings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Animal motifs | Dragon, phoenix, bat, deer, carp and crane | Mythological narratives, phonetic correspondences and conventional associations | Auspiciousness, blessings, rank, abundance and longevity |
| Plant motifs | Lotus, peony, pomegranate, grapes, pine, bamboo and plum | Fruitfulness, seasonal endurance and established floral symbolism | Marital harmony, fertility, wealth, longevity and moral integrity |
| Composite motifs | Lotus and fish; magpies on plum branches; persimmons with a ruyi sceptre | Combined visual and phonetic associations | Continuing abundance; happiness; fulfilment of wishes |

These meanings also develop through combination. Lotus and fish can express lian nian you yu ( 连年有余), or continuing abundance, through the phonetic relationship between lotus and continuity, and between fish and surplus [35].

Bamboo participates in wishes for peaceful tidings, while persimmons combined with a ruyi sceptre can express the wish that events unfold as desired. On bridal quilt covers, this repertoire acquires particular relevance through its relationship with marriage and household formation. Fruitfulness corresponds with anticipated descendants, abundance with household prosperity, and longevity with the well-being of family members. Animal and plant motifs therefore extend the wishes expressed by wedding figures such as The Celestial Immortal Delivering a Child.

### 3.2.3 Geometric Motifs

Geometric motifs provide a framework for Blue Jiaxie compositions, separating narrative scenes and coordinating borders through repetition. Drawing on traditional Chinese ornamental forms and design conventions, these motifs appear primarily along the edges of pictorial fields and within compositional frameworks. As subsidiary decoration or dividing elements, they separate imagery, define boundaries and regulate visual rhythm [15, 16]. Common examples include wan motifs, meander patterns, beaded borders and cloud-and-thunder patterns (see Table 3).

The “wan ” motif participates in both Buddhist and vernacular symbolic traditions. Lu [42] examines its historical association with the character meaning ten thousand, while Priest and Simmons [40] discuss its use in wishes for longevity. Its relevance to marriage is illustrated by a Qing wedding altar frontal, where a meandering “wan ” border accompanies double-happiness characters to convey lasting matrimonial happiness [43].

Hui Wen ( 回纹) or meander patterns communicate continuity through their repeated angular turns. Zhang and Li [44] associate this enduring structure with conventional wishes for uninterrupted prosperity. Lianzhu Wen ( 连珠纹) (Beaded borders) similarly establish connected sequences of circular units. In their study of Tianshui silk carpets, Zhang and Wang [45] relate such configurations to completeness, enduring happiness and familial unity. These interpretations provide comparative support for examining geometric ornament within the auspicious setting of bridal textiles. Yunlei Wen ( 云雷纹) (Cloud-and-thunder patterns) belong to a longstanding vocabulary of continuous spiral ornament, historically employed around principal imagery [46]. In Blue Jiaxie, their repetition and enclosure within geometric frames establish visual continuity and distinguish central scenes from subsidiary decoration [16]. Geometric ornament thus helps integrate narrative subjects and auspicious wishes into a coherent textile composition.

**Table 3.** *Analysis of Geometric Motifs in Blue Jiaxie*

| Geometric motif | Structural characteristics | Typical placement | Interpretive significance |
|---|---|---|---|
| Beaded border (lianzhu wen) | Repeated circular or oval units forming continuous bands | Dividing bands and outer borders | Connection, visual continuity and recurring blessings |
| Cloud-and-thunder pattern (yunlei wen) | Continuous rounded or angular spirals | Corners, surrounding fields and subsidiary ornament | Traditional cloud-and-thunder imagery; rhythmic continuity |
| Meander (hui wen) | Repeated angular turns resembling the character 回 | Outer frames and internal divisions | Continuity, visual cohesion and an uninterrupted decorative sequence |
| Wan motif | Individual or interlocking -shaped units | Backgrounds, corners and decorative infill | Myriad blessings, longevity and enduring auspiciousness |
| Polygonal frame | Enclosing geometric outline | Around principal pictorial fields | Spatial order, enclosure and emphasis on the central subject |

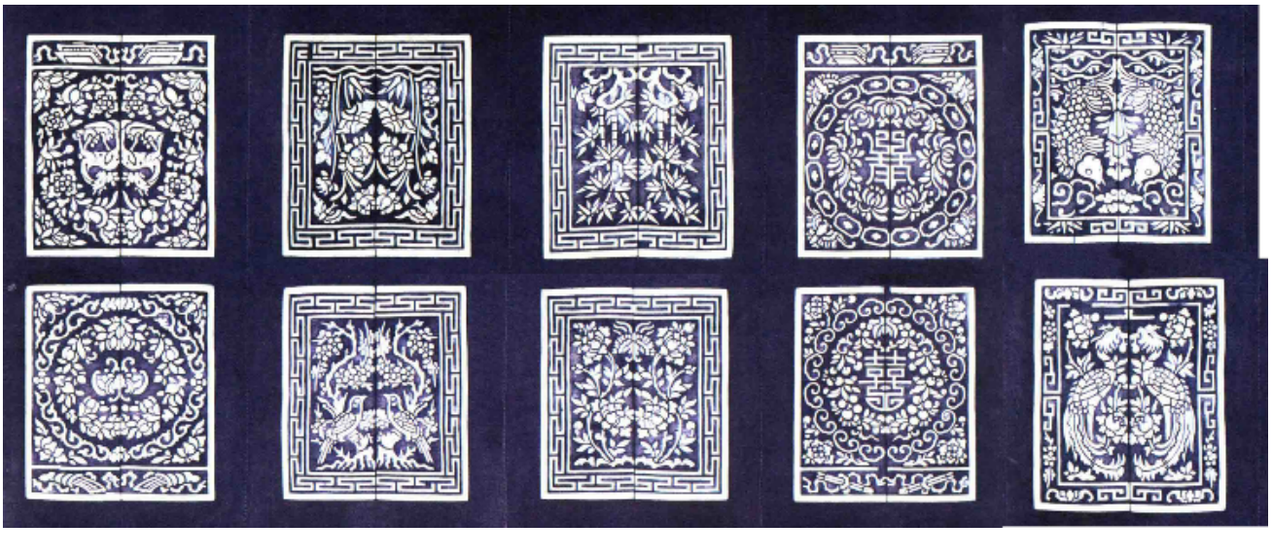


**Figure 7.** *Animal and Plant Patterns*

Qing dynasty Blue Jiaxie cotton quilt cover with Fu, Lu, Shou and Xi motifs (fortune, official emolument, longevity and happiness), 200 × 230 cm. Collection of Zhang Qin, pp. 117–124 [38].

## 3.3. ICONOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF BLUE JIAXIE MOTIFS

Iconological interpretation considers how images express the values and social relationships of their historical setting [24]. In Blue Jiaxie, the relationship between patterned cloth and bridal use provides the central context for interpretation. Five related themes connect its imagery, ceremonial use and craft practice with family continuity, regional stories, popular beliefs and experiences of the natural world.

### 3.3.1 Fertility and Family Continuity

Children's scenes, child-granting figures and fruit-bearing plants connect marriage with expectations concerning descendants. Zhang's [11] field research records beliefs in Yongqiang linking the absence of a Blue Jiaxie bridal quilt with household discord and failure to produce sons. Such accounts place the textile within a historical system of expectations surrounding marriage and reproduction. The most representative example is the Hundred Boys motif (Figure 5), in which groups of children at play express the ideal of a family flourishing across generations. The composition emphasises multiplicity through the number of figures, while their gestures and expressions convey joy and harmony, suggesting familial unity and abundant offspring. Subsidiary motifs also carry blessings for fertility. Grapes, melons and other fruits, with their numerous seeds and plentiful yields, evoke wishes for many children and ample sustenance. Fruit and seed imagery extends the same aspiration through associations between natural growth and human reproduction, a relationship also documented in studies of Chinese auspicious imagery [35].

These wishes were shaped by gender and family organisation. Bray [10] shows how domestic technologies and reproductive responsibilities contributed to women's social positions in late imperial China. Within this broader context, the preference for sons in Blue Jiaxie imagery can be understood as expressing expectations about continuing the family line and maintaining ancestral obligations [47]. The textile consequently carries both affection for future children and the social demands placed upon a bride.

### 3.3.2 Wedding Customs and Social Recognition

Blue Jiaxie acquired particular significance through its preparation, display and use as a bridal textile. Zhang [2, 11] documents its importance within wedding exchanges and its prominent presentation during marriage celebrations. Public display made the cloth part of the relationship between the bride's natal family, the receiving household and the wider community. Research on Chinese marriage demonstrates that dowry goods could communicate family standing and influence how a marriage was publicly recognised [47]. This offers a comparative context for understanding the ceremonial visibility of Blue Jiaxie. A quilt cover supplied practical bedding while also presenting the family's wishes and its fulfilment of local expectations.

Its blue-and-white appearance should likewise be understood within this established ceremonial setting. Hong et al. [15] associate Blue Jiaxie aesthetics with restrained colour, practical usefulness and economical making. The acceptance of this palette in wedding textiles shows how regional conventions gave particular colours their ceremonial suitability. The colour of Blue Jiaxie also acquired meaning through language associated with marriage. In the regional interpretation described in Blue Jiaxie scholarship [17], qing ( 青) is pronounced "qin", making it a homophone of qin ( 亲) in chengqin ( 成亲), meaning to marry. Presenting Blue Jiaxie quilt covers or cloth as wedding gifts therefore conveyed blessings through this phonetic association. The cloth's meaning developed through the combination of its appearance, its recognised place in wedding customs and its continued use within the household.

### 3.3.3 Regional Opera and Shared Emotional Ideals

Blue Jiaxie quilt covers feature a wide range of subjects, many drawn from opera narratives that reflect the distinctive cultural and aesthetic traditions of southern Zhejiang [11, 12]. Wenzhou, Taizhou and neighbouring areas have a long-standing enthusiasm for theatrical performance. The region fostered Nanxi ( 南戏), an early foundational form of Chinese opera, alongside local genres such as Ou opera ( 瓯剧). As vehicles for transmitting regional culture, these theatrical traditions provided both a broad audience familiar with their stories and a rich repertoire of subjects for Blue Jiaxie, giving bridal quilt imagery emotional meanings rooted in dramatic narratives [5, 6]. Through familiar characters and stories, opera motifs offered a means of expressing hopes for divine protection and a fulfilled life, together with an attachment to moral ideals [16, 17]. Studies of Blue Jiaxie establish the importance of Kunqu ( 昆曲) and other local theatrical repertoires in its patterns [12, 31]. Their incorporation into bridal textiles connected the emotional appeal of theatrical narratives with the blessings surrounding marriage, bringing personal aspirations and popular beliefs into a shared visual form [5].

The reunion and marriage scenes examined above bring affection, family recognition and social advancement into a shared pictorial setting. Their relevance to bridal textiles lies in the correspondence between a successful dramatic resolution and the desired future of the newly married couple [5, 31]. Examination success adds a further aspiration:

personal achievement becomes connected with household prosperity and honour. Silberstein's [6] study of narrative embroidery similarly demonstrates how textiles drew upon stories circulating through performance and print. Blue Jiaxie places such stories within an object used during marriage and domestic life. Its patterns can therefore be read as a material means of carrying familiar narratives beyond the stage. This interpretation accords with Assmann's [48] account of images and rituals as cultural forms through which shared knowledge is maintained. The textile provides a setting in which regional stories and family aspirations meet.

#### 3.3.4 Popular Belief in Domestic Life

Blue Jiaxie motifs bring mythological figures and religious imagery together within a system of visual codes [18]. By presenting these subjects in human form and arranging them within narrative scenes on bridal textiles, artisans give cultural beliefs a vivid and readily understandable visual expression [17]. The Hehe Er Xian (The Two Immortals of Harmony and Union) (Figure 6, left) illustrate this process through their paired figures and identifying attributes. Alongside human figures expressing blessings and devotion, Blue Jiaxie uses phonetic associations to translate cultural meanings into visual form. In Hehe imagery, the lotus (he, 荷) and round box (he, 盒) evoke harmony (he, 和) and union (he, 合), bringing together visual forms, spoken sounds and cultural associations [35]. This symbolic language communicates cultural meanings through images while showing how popular beliefs are adapted into familiar imagery on practical household textiles [15]. Lu and Dong [37] demonstrate that "Hehe" belief developed through several historical identities and encompassed family reunion, marital harmony and prosperity. On a bridal quilt cover, the marriage setting gives particular relevance to the wish for harmony between the couple. Tian Xian Song Zi (The Celestial Immortal Delivering a Child) (Figure 6, right) imagery extends this concern towards the anticipated birth and protection of children [17].

The combination of these subjects creates a relationship among affection, reproduction and protection. Familiar objects and human figures make the wishes visually accessible, while their placement on bedding brings them into routine household use. Zhao and Zheng's [18] discussion of Blue Jiaxie's symbolic language supports examining this relationship between recognisable forms and cultural associations. Religious meanings are carried into domestic life through the repeated use and viewing of a practical textile.

#### 3.3.5 Agrarian Knowledge and Relations with Nature

The material production of Blue Jiaxie connects its imagery with knowledge of plants, wood and dyeing conditions. Indigo preparation and carved-board dyeing depend on practical experience with natural materials [1]. Comparative ethnobotanical research likewise demonstrates that traditional indigo production involves detailed knowledge of plant resources and processing techniques [30]. Hong et al. [15] relate Blue Jiaxie craftsmanship to vernacular principles of economy, usefulness and skilled making. These principles offer a concrete basis for discussing the relationship between craft and its environment. The repeated use of carved boards and the careful management of dye reflect the coordination of available resources with household needs.

Plant imagery adds a further connection. Flowers, seeds and fruit link visible processes of growth with wishes for descendants, prosperity and renewal [35]. In an agrarian setting, such associations draw upon familiar experiences of seasonal change and cultivation. The relationship between people and nature is thus expressed through both the transformation of plant resources into patterned cloth and the use of natural forms to imagine the future of the family.

### 3.4. CONTRIBUTION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The three stages of analysis reveal connections among the material form, symbolic subjects and cultural setting of Blue Jiaxie. Preiconographic description identifies how carved-board dyeing produces the blue-and-white contrast and contributes to the organisation of framed scenes and repeated ornament. Iconographic analysis identifies opera characters, wedding figures, children, auspicious deities and natural motifs. Iconological interpretation connects these subjects with expectations concerning marriage, descendants, family recognition and protection. Together, the findings suggest that bridal use provides a common setting in which subjects drawn from different cultural sources express related wishes for the household.

The central finding concerns how these meanings work together. A reunion scene presents the resolution of a dramatic story, children's imagery anticipates descendants, and the Hehe immortals express matrimonial harmony. Their meanings become connected when they appear within the setting of a bridal quilt cover. This interpretation develops the discussion of symbolic language and wedding culture in earlier Blue Jiaxie research [17, 18]. It also corresponds with Silberstein's [6] account of narrative imagery in Chinese dress and Zeitlin and Li's [5] examination of opera across decorative media. Blue Jiaxie provides a regional example of this relationship, in which theatrical stories enter a textile associated with marriage and household life. Its significance lies in how recognisable stories and auspicious subjects bring emotional hopes, moral expectations and family aspirations into the same patterned object.

The application of Panofsky's framework helps explain this relationship by connecting observations of form with the identification of subjects and their cultural interpretation. Each stage contributes to understanding why particular imagery matters within the textile's setting [24]. For example, recognising the lotus and box identifies the Hehe immortals; considering their placement on bridal bedding explains the particular relevance of matrimonial harmony. Recent research on Nini Dog motifs similarly demonstrates the value of connecting formal characteristics, symbolic associations and cultural contexts through iconological analysis [28]. The Blue Jiaxie case directs this approach towards the relationship among motifs within a practical ceremonial object. It shows how cultural interpretation can develop from the connections between subjects and use, rather than ending with separate explanations of individual symbols.

These findings suggest that heritage protection should address both the visible patterns and the cultural relationships they express. Preserving a recognisable figure or decorative outline provides only part of the information needed to explain a motif. Documentation and educational interpretation can also retain the associated story, identifying attributes and relationship with wedding customs. For contemporary design, this knowledge offers a basis for deciding which elements carry a subject's identity and which aspects of its arrangement can be adapted. The lotus and box associated with the Hehe immortals, for example, connect the figures with wishes for harmony and union [35]. Understanding such relationships can inform adaptation while allowing historical meanings to be explained in terms accessible to contemporary audiences.

Several limitations remain. The selected examples cover only part of the Blue Jiaxie repertoire, and cropped images restrict understanding of their positions within complete quilt covers. Some narrative identifications and collection details require further verification. Cultural interpretation also relies substantially on published studies, which cannot establish the intentions of individual makers or the experiences of particular users. Future research could examine complete textiles alongside workshop records, performance sources and accounts from artisans and household users. Such work would clarify regional differences, test existing identifications and explore how the meanings of Blue Jiaxie are understood and adapted today.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on Panofsky's iconological theory, this study systematically interpreted the formal characteristics, symbolic meanings and cultural significance of Blue Jiaxie motifs. Preiconographic description examined production techniques, colour, motif characteristics and composition. Iconographic analysis classified human figures, animals, plants and geometric patterns, tracing their sources and symbolic associations. Iconological interpretation situated these motifs within the wedding customs, regional opera, folk traditions and agrarian understandings of nature in southern Zhejiang, exploring their social functions, emotional significance and cultural meanings.

Through this approach, Blue Jiaxie was understood as a cultural text that communicates through visual codes, expressing values associated with life-cycle rituals, ethical relationships and aesthetic preferences. Blue Jiaxie bridal textiles bring regional storytelling and auspicious imagery into a shared expression of hopes for family life. Their cultural significance emerges through the relationship between patterned cloth, marriage customs and household use. This study contributes to understanding that relationship by connecting visual interpretation with the textile's historical social setting. These connections provide a basis for explaining historical meanings while allowing their relevance to contemporary life to be reconsidered.

### Authorship and Contributions

Deng Lujie: Conceptualisation, developing the research focus on the relationships between Blue Jiaxie imagery, bridal use and cultural meanings; Methodology, adapting Panofsky's iconological framework to the analysis of textile motifs; Formal analysis, conducting preiconographic description, iconographic identification and iconological interpretation of the selected examples; Writing (original draft), preparing the manuscript and developing the discussion of marriage customs, regional opera, popular beliefs and agrarian knowledge. Zeng Qi: Data curation, organising the selected textile images and relevant technical, ethnographic and art historical literature, including their source information; Writing (review and editing), critically reviewing the interpretation of motifs, refining the connections between visual evidence and cultural context, and improving the manuscript's structure, clarity and citation consistency.

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Data Availability**

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT to assist with drafting, language editing and text organisation. The authors subsequently reviewed and revised the content to ensure its accuracy, clarity and academic rigour. All authors take full responsibility for the final manuscript, including any errors or omissions.

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