

Unveiling the Symbolism: A Comparative Exploration of Chinese Mandarin Square and British Heraldry

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The exchange and mutual appreciation of different cultures is an important topic in the context of globalization, and traditional patterns are the crystallization of the national cultures of various countries. The study focuses on the Ming Dynasty Mandarin square in ancient China and the Tudor Dynasty coat of arms during the same period in England. By using comparative research, case studies, and combining historical documents and images, the origins of the two types of decorations are traced, and their social connotations and influencing factors are analyzed. Research has shown that under the influence of the historical backgrounds of politics, economy, and culture, the two types of decorative patterns exhibit a realistic aesthetic trend. The cultural connotations not only demonstrate social narrative functions such as customs and rituals, but also reflect political system functions such as hierarchy and honor. The different historical origins give rise to cultural differences in the selection of decorative elements between the two. The comparative study of the two is not only beneficial for conducting decorative design research from a global perspective, but also can promote the modern inheritance of traditional patterns while seeking common ground and reserving differences.

Keywords: Ming Dynasty, Tudor Dynasty, Mandarin square, coat of arms, connotations, comparative research

Introduction

Patterns, as an artistic form, embody profound historical and cultural significance. In the context of globalization, comparative studies of traditional art forms with long histories from different countries hold enlightening and propelling significance for the exchange, mutual learning, and innovative development of art and design. This paper focuses on a comparative study of two representative patterns from the East and West: Mandarin square (buzi 补子) of the Chinese Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and the heraldry of the English Tudor Dynasty (1485-1603). These two art forms flourished in parallel for approximately 161 years, influenced by similar historical contexts yet distinct historical accumulations, making them highly comparable in terms of decorative forms and expressive meanings. This paper systematically organizes and compares these two patterns in terms of form and meaning to address the following questions:

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- (1) What are the aesthetic concepts of ancient traditional pattern art, and what are their origins?
- (2) How does the social environment influence the conceptualization of pattern design?
- (3) What are the social symbolic meanings and functions embedded in traditional patterns?

The Origins of the Ming Mandarin Square and Tudor Heraldry

The Ming Mandarin Square organizes various pattern elements within a specific square of 30-40 centimeters, while the Tudor heraldry contains meaningful charges. Both designs are representative, unique, and historically significant patterns from the same historical period. The square form of the Ming *buzi* and the shield shape of the Tudor heraldry (coat of arms) originate from their respective national cultures and historical practices. The functional attributes of these decorative systems were designed to serve the developmental needs of their contemporary societies.

The Formal Origins of Historical Inheritance

In early descriptions found in official historical texts such as *The History of Ming* and *The Collected Statutes of the Great Ming*, the decorative patterns on the front and back of ancient robes were often referred to as chest-back. The Ming chest-back design was directly inherited from the Yuan dynasty, as seen in the attire depicted in *The Hunting Scene of Emperor Khubilai Khan*. The Yuan Dynasty clothing philosophy was drawing inspiration from the Jin and Song Dynasties; thus the weaving techniques of chest-back can be traced back to the Jin Dynasty (Zhao, 2005). The chest-back was a defining feature of official robes in the early Ming Dynasty, evolving into a coexistence of chest-back and *buzi* by the mid to late Ming period (Liu, 2020).

The term, coat of arms, is a variation of the older term, coat armour, which originally referred to a type of knightly garment worn over armor during the late Middle Ages, adorned with heraldic patterns—a surcoat or battle robe (Slater, 2004). The use of heraldry evolved over centuries, from the medieval chivalric system and the Crusades to jousting tournaments. By the Tudor period, the overall structure of heraldry had matured, typically taking the form of a shield that was wider at the top and narrower at the bottom, exhibiting a balanced and symmetrical classical aesthetic. Broadly speaking, the coat of arms comprises eight main components, the Shield of Arms, located at the center, serves as the primary element of the design and is the main focus of this study. From its emergence in the 12th century to the 16th century, the shield was predominantly heater-shaped for men and lozenge-shaped for women. The heater-shaped shield originated from the shields used by knights in medieval warfare.

Therefore, in terms of formal origins, both are the result of historical and cultural accumulation. The Ming *buzi* inherited the form and craftsmanship of the Yuan Dynasty chest-back, while the Tudor heraldry continued the medieval tradition, gradually refining and perfecting the heraldic style.

Adapting to the Functional Shifts of the Era

The Mandarin square of the Ming Dynasty was primarily used in the casual attire of the imperial relatives, nobility, and officials. Its predecessor, the chest-back, during the Yuan dynasty, did not signify official rank but served merely as decoration. The practice of using bird and animal motifs on robes to denote status can be traced back to the first year of the Wude era in the Tang dynasty (Dai, 1995). After the ascension of Emperor Taizu of Ming, there was a strong emphasis on restoring the ritual norms of the Tang and Han dynasties, with

the clothing system being a core aspect of these norms, crucial for governing the country and maintaining order. Consequently, the function of the Mandarin square shifted from the decorative to the socio-political, becoming an essential tool for distinguishing hierarchy and clarifying authority, facilitating state governance and feudal rule, ultimately systematizing the civilian birds and military beasts uniform system.

Heraldry, evolving since the Middle Ages and flourishing during the Tudor Dynasty, became an important emblem widely used by the nobility to adorn their possessions. The functional significance of heraldry varied across different periods. During the medieval times of warfare, it was primarily used for identifying knights from different factions. They later evolved into patterns symbolizing high social status, emphasizing decorative and emblematic significance. Heraldic designs could be found on clothing, houses, castles, churches, and were prominent at significant events such as weddings, coronations, and funerals, embodying symbolic and hereditary characteristics. Through its imagery, heraldry could convey specific social information about the owner's family, marital alliances, territorial claims, and official positions, fully showcasing the bearer's aesthetic preferences and personal traits.

In both nations, which were at the peak of feudal rule, their decorative motifs served not only as essential elements of ornamentation but also as significant carriers of social information.

Symbolic Characteristics of the Ming Mandarin Square and Tudor Heraldry

The Ming Mandarin square and the Tudor heraldry are both independent visual forms constructed from multiple pattern elements. Emerging from the accumulated cultural practices of their specific social milieus, they established contextual meanings between creators and users, organically integrating historical traditional patterns with contemporary symbolic expressions to construct a visual discourse that transitions from formal aesthetics to semantic communication. Against the synchronic backdrop of broader socio-historical contexts, these two decorative systems share numerous cultural commonalities. Their expressive characteristics will be analyzed in terms of narrative documentation and moral didacticism.

The Expression of Meaning in Narrative Documentation

(1) Festive customs and beliefs in narrative context

Under the influence of distinct social systems and modes of production, China and the West developed significantly different cultural traditions. The Chinese seasonal calendar emerged as a comprehensive system of solar terms and timekeeping, refined through ancient laborers' continuous observation of natural patterns to guide agricultural and social activities. By the Warring States period, the full Twenty-Four Solar Terms had taken shape. During the Tang Dynasty, these evolved from primitive nature worship into humanistic customs, and by the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, the seasonal system reached maturity. This period also saw the rise of corresponding decorative motifs, particularly in the form of seasonal Mandarin squares. These seasonal motifs flourished not only among the populace but also influenced court fashion. Employing metaphorical and allegorical techniques, seasonal Mandarin squares narrated festive imagery, depicting humanistic social practices and reflecting a series of customary activities tied to climatic changes (Table 1).

Table 1
The Seasonal Mandarin Squares in the Ming Dynasty

Traditional Festival	Element	Symbolic Meaning
First Day of the New Year/Zhengdan	Calabash, dragon, auspicious clouds, seascapes with crashing waves, etc.	Cucurbits have various meanings: 1. Praying for a good harvest and blessings. 2. Symbolizing the beginning of all things. 3. Serving as a Taoist ritual implement and symbol, capable of warding off evil and avoiding disasters. 4. Implying abundant offspring and prosperity for future generations.
Lantern Festival/Shangyuan	Lanterns, two dragons chasing a pearl, auspicious clouds, lotuses, peonies, etc.	The tradition of admiring lanterns, where the lantern serves as a metaphor for “ascending,” embodies the essence of harvest and signifies the transition from the old to the new.

Unlike China’s Ming Dynasty, the heraldic narratives of the Tudor Dynasty were predominantly anchored in religious symbolism, reflecting Europe’s long-standing cultural tradition of intertwining secular authority and spiritual governance since the Middle Ages. The Tudor monarchy engineered a top-down religious reformation, asserting political dominance over spiritual matters to establish the Church of England—a hybrid institution retaining Catholic elements while serving state interests. During Elizabeth I’s reign (1558-1603), the Crown consolidated control over religion, promoting pluralistic tolerance while strategically leveraging ecclesiastical resources. Tudor nobility adorned their coats of arms with traditional Christian motifs, such as crosses and sacramental imagery, to signal doctrinal allegiance and spiritual devotion (Table 2).

Table 2
The Religious Charges of Heraldry

Element	Symbolic Meaning
Fleur-de-lis or Unicorn	Holy Mary
Phoenix	Resurrection

The Ming seasonal Mandarin squares reflected festivals and customs and the Tudor heraldry had its roots in religious traditions, yet both were deeply embedded in daily life and mirrored the sociocultural ethos of their eras. However, their decorative expressions diverged markedly. Tudor heraldry carried symbolic meanings tied to individual or familial identity and faith, with designs reflecting personal aesthetic preferences to emphasize uniqueness and distinction. In contrast, Ming seasonal motifs exemplified a collective aesthetic sensibility, where auspicious patterns emerged as shared cultural wisdom honed through historical continuity, adhering to hierarchical themes and standardized stylistic conventions.

(2) Rituals and confederacy in archival records

The decorative motifs of the Ming and Tudor dynasties similarly embodied commemorations of significant rituals and expressions of auspicious wishes. The Ming Dynasty hosted numerous ceremonial events, with three major types verifiable through surviving artifacts related to the Mandarin square: the Wanshou Festival, Banli, and imperial weddings. Each grand ceremony featured corresponding Mandarin square designs to enhance ritual solemnity, typically organized in centered or symmetrical compositions. The Wanshou Festival (万寿圣节) was an imperial birthday celebration, where decorative motifs prominently featured longevity symbolism

(e.g., 寿 shou characters and pine-crane combinations). The Banli (颁历) ceremony marked the emperor's promulgation of the new calendar, typically at the year's end (Zhang, 1888). During this event, the ruling elite wore garments adorned with perpetuity motifs to signify dynastic continuity. For the imperial weddings, the Ming court designed *buzi* embroidered with bold 喜 (xi) characters, using vibrant colors and direct symbolism to amplify jubilant atmospheres (Zhao, 2023).

The heraldry of the Tudor Dynasty followed well-defined institutional protocols and norms in ceremonial and symbolic representation, employing the marshalling or adding charges to articulate marital alliances and political unions among individuals, families, and states. The design principles of these prioritized clarity and precision in information presentation, fundamentally serving the purposes of feudal governance and administration. In this era that emphasized hierarchical endogamy, the formation of British aristocratic networks was predicated upon lineage inheritance and matrimonial ties (Painter, 1943). The merging of shields distinctly reflected familial alliances through three primary compositional methods: Quartering, Dimidiation, and the Escutcheon of Pretence (Boutell, 2008). Another significant relational dynamic among noble houses was the feudal alliance. Both marital unions and political alliances served as crucial mechanisms for aristocratic consolidation, with heraldry providing a visual and formalized representation of unified ceremonial significance. Alliances manifested feudal subordination. The heraldry employed similarity-based design to manifest this alliance relationship.

The Ming Mandarin square embodied emotional blessings and aspirations in court celebrations, while Tudor heraldry emphasized rational documentation of alliances through precise symbolic systems. The motifs and compositional forms of the Mandarin square tended to follow established conventions, whereas heraldry primarily expressed the meaning of union through direct combinations of different forms of heraldry.

Conveying the Connotative Meaning in Didactic Propaganda

(1) Hierarchy and didacticism in historical admonition

In the 24th year of the Hongwu reign (1391 AD) of the Ming Dynasty, officials' regular court attire featuring rank badges on both chest and back became formally designated as the official robe with Mandarin squares, which were mandated for wear during imperial audiences and administrative deliberations. The rank badges epitomized feudal patriarchal hierarchy, enforcing the principle that superiors may adopt lower-rank elements, but inferiors must never usurp higher-rank attributes, thereby functioning to clarify social strata and stabilize public order.

Color-Coded Ranking System

Scarlet: Reserved for 1st–4th rank officials

Blue: Designated 5th–7th rank administrators

Green: Assigned to 8th–9th rank local magistrates

Embroidered Zoomorphic Motifs

Civil Officials: Paired avian designs (e.g., cranes, pheasants, peacock) symbolized literary brilliance through resplendent plumage.

Military Officials: Solitary beasts (e.g., lions, tigers, leopard) embodied martial prowess via muscular forms.

In England, every ancient and distinguished family possessed a unique heraldry, with its charges derived from the preferences of the founding ancestor, covering a wide range of motifs. The emergence of heraldry fulfilled the need for the nobility—both in England and across Europe—to distinguish and identify different branches of lineage, gradually forming a marking system known as Cadency, also referred to as the secondary distinction of heraldry. Cadency marks were added to the father's shield at the honour point or other prominent positions and could be layered for successive generations (Boutell, 2008). Illegitimate children could incorporate a special mark of bastardy only with paternal permission, while unmarried female descendants were permitted to display their father's arms within a diamond-shaped frame. Given the hereditary nature of titles and honors, cadency held significant importance in differentiating status within noble families, reflecting both historical authenticity and the functional adaptability of heraldry.

Thus it can be seen that the Ming rank badges endowed birds and beasts with personified special qualities through the techniques of metaphorical association and virtue analogy, subtly educating officials to enhance their professional competence and regulate their conduct. In contrast, Tudor Dynasty hierarchy was primarily manifested through cadency marks—a system devoid of didactic function that emphasized individual distinction while demarcating social status and wealth.

(2) Honor and rewards in public advocacy

Rewards serve not only as recognition of practical achievements, but also as a driving force that motivates people to forge ahead. To meet the needs of governance, rulers throughout history have bestowed honors upon subjects who made outstanding contributions, thereby demonstrating their political acumen in exercising generosity and benevolence. The Ming Dynasty adopted the practice of granting ceremonial robes as rewards, while the Tudor Dynasty conferred heraldry in a similar fashion.

The practice of conferring bestowed ceremonial robes (赐服) in China was first documented during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian (690-705) of the Tang Dynasty. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) institutionalized this tradition by developing a comprehensive system of bestowals that incorporated three distinct categories of recipients: meritorious officials and descendants of eminent families who received robes exceeding their official rank; palace eunuchs; and foreign tributary rulers and diplomatic envoys. These bestowed robes featured a hierarchical system of the brodered Mandarin squares, arranged in descending order of prestige: Python robes (蟒服), flying fish robes (飞鱼服), confronted-bull robes (斗牛服), kylin robes (麒麟服), and baize (白泽) with other Mandarin squares (Zhao, 2012). The Ming emperors strategically employed this sartorial reward system to achieve multiple political objectives: reinforcing imperial authority through visible markers of status, maintaining the ruler-minister relationship, and creating an alternative incentive mechanism to bureaucratic promotion that conserved state finances while conferring prestige.

The Tudor monarchs granted distinctive heraldic emblems to individuals of exceptional merit. Similar to the Ming practice, these rewards served to reinforce royal authority and strengthen the sovereign-subject relationship. The rewards were primarily conferred in two forms: first, through the augmentation of heraldic ornaments, such as the granting of supporters, crests, or mantling; second, by additions to the escutcheon, including the placement of an escutcheon of pretence, the incorporation of cantons, the creation of new quarterings, or the bestowal of symbolically significant charges. The addition of such heraldic charges served to manifest the honor and privileges bestowed upon the recipient. These granted emblems typically conveyed the

rationale for the reward and the sovereign's preferences, rather than reflecting the personal characteristics or tastes of the recipient.

Factors Influencing the Symbolic Expression in the Mandarin Square and Heraldry

The social significance expressed by the similarities between the Mandarin square and the heraldry is closely related to the political, economic, ideological, and cultural backgrounds of the time. These decorative patterns become important carriers for regulating social order, displaying wealth, identity, and status, as well as expressing individualized secular lifestyles.

The Integration of Feudal Autocracy and Hierarchical Ideology

Both the Ming Dynasty and Tudor Dynasty were feudal regimes, and reflected hierarchical order in various aspects to meet their respective political needs. As a key part of the costume system, Ming Dynasty's rank badges were important visual representations of Zhu Yuanzhang's governing philosophy of rectifying governance principles, clarifying etiquette and law, and defining social statuses (Wang, 2016).

The concept of class differentiation in Britain emerged in the early 11th century; by the 15th century, a five-tier noble title system was established (Guy, 1997). Heraldry, a major noble symbol, was mostly derived from royal cultural signs and was later imitated by the powerful and expanding noble class. From Henry VII, the monarch held all privileges and ruling powers of the supreme ruler. Meanwhile, the nobility's administrative power weakened, making heraldry—symbolizing noble identity—crucial for distinguishing classes. The primogeniture system endowed the birth order of sons with significant hierarchical meanings. Tudor Dynasty's heraldry emphasized the exclusive aristocratic cultural traits of hierarchy and status.

The Convergence of Capital Sprouting and Consumer Culture

In the mid-late Ming Dynasty (1436-1644), following the Hongzhi Rejuvenation, national strength rose, social structure shifted, the urban population grew, foreign trade expanded, capitalist rudiments appeared, and the social ethos turned luxurious. Encouraged by the government, handicraft production—especially the textile industry—reached new heights, with wider production bases, advanced technology and improved tools. Traditional silk weaving saw unprecedented progress in looms, procedures and craftsmanship. This is evidenced by the superb jacquard fabrics from Beijing's Dingling Mausoleum and the diverse textiles recorded in *Records of Tianshui Bingshan* (Jiang, 2021). Advanced textile technology and booming trade, along with growing materialistic consumption, laid a solid material foundation for the top-down spread of costume patterns. The Tudor Dynasty transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial society, a key phase from feudalism to capitalism. Guided by "mercantilism", it prioritized commercial trade. The Age of Discovery (late 15th-early 16th centuries) boosted East-West trade. Henry VIII's Reformation spurred urban growth and domestic market prosperity. Led by the nobles' luxurious lifestyle, wealthy squires and citizens competed for noble costumes and sought status-symbol heraldry, driving the latter's popularity.

The Fusion of Historical Tradition and Humanistic Sentiment

Different regions and ethnic groups, with their unique histories and cultures, have nurtured distinct cultural traditions. Meanwhile, both the Ming Dynasty and the Tudor Dynasty existed in a relatively open environment

of exchange, enjoyed social stability, and experienced economic prosperity, providing fertile soil for the cultivation of an inclusive and open humanistic spirit.

In the early Ming Dynasty, pattern themes were predominantly centered on moral instruction, emotional expression, and auspicious connotations. By the mid-to-late period, the pursuit of individuality—marked by breaking conventions and embracing novelty—had become a prevalent social trend. This humanistic secular trait resulted from the integration of the refined culture (of the upper class and literati-officials) and the popular culture of ordinary people (Han, 2017). The agriculture-prioritizing and commerce-restricting policy, together with farming-linked seasonal traditions, jointly facilitated the emergence and development of the seasonal Mandarin squares, a product integrating historical traditions and humanistic feelings. Religious beliefs and chivalry are the core of traditional culture rooted in the English cultural psyche. During Tudor Dynasty, the Western Renaissance rose in England, whose ideological core advocated applying knowledge practically, focusing on the present, and fulfilling aspirations. This pragmatic spirit was reflected in the application and advancement of perspective and anatomy in art and design, leading to a realistic turn in aesthetics that shaped heraldic styles. Thus, traditional noble heraldic devices embodied Christian and chivalric cultural traits, while the new generation of heraldry holders emphasized personalized expression and humanistic spirit in motif selection.

Conclusion

The Ming Mandarin square and the Tudor heraldry are both products of historical inheritance and contemporary innovation. The profound national and ethnic historical and cultural connotations have shaped a widely disseminated narrative discourse system. In similar historical eras marked by the coordinated development of politics, economy, and culture, they bore significant social functions such as recording historical events, displaying cultural life and beliefs, regulating social order, and consolidating rulers' authority. Especially under the influence of humanism, traditional aesthetics and values underwent transformations, shifting towards secularization and realism. A comparative analysis of the two is conducive to studying the development of decorative patterns from a global perspective, understanding cultural differences, promoting exchanges and mutual learning in decorative arts, and providing cultural roots and theoretical foundations for modern innovative designs of decorative patterns.

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