



The Cultural Implication of the Qixi Festival: Representation of Love and Care through Thoughtful Art-Making Primary School

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Abstract

The Qixi Festival, also known as Chinese Valentine's Day, is a traditional celebration in China held on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month. It tells the story of two lovers, Zhinü and Niulang, who are separated by the Milky Way and reunite once a year. The festival is rooted in the legend of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, a tale of love, devotion, and longing. Traditional customs include worshipping the stars, showcasing needlework skills, and wishing for love and happiness. The first star, Vega (Weaving Girl Star), represents Zhinü, a skilled weaver, while the second star, Altair (Cowherd Star), represents Niulang, a mortal cowherd who falls in love with Zhinü. The third star, Deneb (Bridge Star), is associated with the bridge of magpies that forms over the Milky Way, symbolizing the Heavenly River.

During ancient times, people would observe the stars Vega and Altair and hold rituals to honor their reunion, pray for love, marriage, and weaving skills. This star lore has been deeply intertwined with the romantic and astronomical significance of the Qixi Festival. Modern celebrations often include romantic gestures, gift-giving, and expressions of affection akin to Western Valentine's Day. The Qixi Festival reflects China's rich cultural heritage and continues to evolve, blending traditional rituals with contemporary practices. Students will learn about needlework and gift-giving, as well as the advances and techniques in Chinese textiles and embroidery.

Keywords: *Quix Festival, Chinese Valentine's Day, Romantic festival*

Introduction

The Qixi Festival, celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, is one of China's most romantic and culturally significant festivals. Also known as the Double Seventh Festival or Chinese Valentine's Day, it originates from the ancient tale of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, two star-crossed lovers who reunite once a year. Beyond its romantic associations, Qixi holds deep cultural significance, particularly in its connection to traditional crafts and artistry, such as needlework.

Historically, needlework was a prominent feature of Qixi celebrations, especially among women, as a way to demonstrate their skill and dexterity. These crafts were seen as both practical and symbolic, representing qualities like patience, creativity, and dedication—traits highly valued in traditional Chinese society. On Qixi, young women would often gather to showcase their finest embroidery, threading needles under moonlight or engaging in friendly competitions to thread needles through intricate designs. These rituals not only reflected personal talent but also expressed a deeper wish for love, happiness, and familial harmony, which aligned with the festival's themes.

The connection between Qixi and needlework highlights the festival's multifaceted nature. It combines themes of love, artistry, and cultural identity in a celebration that continues to inspire people today.

A Brief History of Embroidery in China

Embroidery, one of China's most treasured traditional crafts, boasts a history spanning over 4,000 years. It emerged during the Neolithic period, as evidenced by the discovery of primitive embroidered textiles in archaeological sites.¹ Over centuries, Chinese embroidery evolved from a practical means of repairing and decorating clothing to a sophisticated art form symbolizing status, culture, and artistry.

Ancient Beginnings

The earliest known examples of embroidery in China date back to the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE). Archaeological finds from this period include fragments of silk fabric embellished with basic embroidery techniques. These early works often featured geometric patterns and simple motifs inspired by nature, such as flowers, birds, and animals.

Development in the Han Dynasty

During the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), embroidery gained significant prominence. The invention of the silk loom and advancements in dyeing techniques allowed for more intricate designs. Silk embroidery (see Figure 1), in particular, became highly prized as silk production flourished and China's trade routes expanded through the Silk Road. Embroidered garments, used for imperial court attire and religious ceremonies, reflected wealth and social hierarchy. These motifs included nature and animals such as dragons, phoenixes, and tigers.

¹. Visit the website (<https://sinocultural.com/pages/history-of-chinese-embroidery>) for further history of Chinese embroidery.



Figure 1: Silk Embroidery

Golden Age in the Tang and Song Dynasties

The Tang (618–907 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties marked a golden age for embroidery in China. Artists developed advanced techniques and introduced complex designs that included mythical creatures, landscapes, and calligraphy. The Tang Dynasty saw embroidery flourish as an integral part of court culture, with richly decorated robes and accessories symbolizing imperial power. By the Song Dynasty, regional schools of embroidery, such as Shu (Sichuan), emerged, showcasing distinct styles and local innovation. The Shu school reflects Sichuan's refined tastes and culture while being practical and versatile. Its focus on delicate details, naturalistic imagery, and harmonious colors made it a staple of Chinese textile artistry.

Ming and Qing Dynasties: Embroidery as Fine Art

In the Ming (1368–1644 CE) and Qing (1644–1912 CE) dynasties, Chinese embroidery reached its artistic peak. Renowned schools like Suzhou, Hunan, Guangdong, and Sichuan refined embroidery into an exquisite art form, each with unique techniques and aesthetics. For example, Suzhou embroidery became known for its delicate, lifelike imagery and dual-sided stitching. Embroidered motifs also carried symbolic meanings, such as dragons for power, phoenixes for prosperity, and peonies for wealth.

Embroidery during these periods was not limited to textiles; it adorned screens, fans, and decorative panels, reflecting the craft's versatility and cultural importance. Techniques such as seed stitching, couching, and satin stitching allowed for vibrant, textured works that resembled paintings.

Embroidery in Modern China

The 20th century saw significant changes in embroidery as the craft adapted to modern tastes and technology. During the Cultural Revolution, traditional crafts, including embroidery,

faced challenges as they were seen as relics of feudalism. However, in the reform era of the late 20th century, efforts were made to revive and preserve embroidery as a cultural heritage. Today, embroidery remains a celebrated art form in China, with traditional styles like Suzhou embroidery recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. Modern artists and designers incorporate embroidery into fashion and art, blending traditional techniques with contemporary aesthetics to keep this ancient craft alive and relevant.

Chinese embroidery² is more than a decorative art; it embodies the nation's rich history, craftsmanship, and cultural values. From its humble beginnings to its sophisticated evolution, embroidery continues to represent the creativity, patience, and artistic brilliance of Chinese culture.

The Process and Techniques of Embroidery in Chinese Art

Chinese embroidery is renowned for its intricate designs, masterful craftsmanship, and symbolic significance. It involves a meticulous process that combines artistic skill, patience, and cultural symbolism. The techniques used in Chinese embroidery are diverse, each reflecting the unique traditions of regional schools and their artistic innovations.

The Embroidery Process³

1. **Designing the Pattern:** The process begins with creating a detailed design, often inspired by nature, mythology, or traditional symbols. These patterns are sketched on paper or directly onto fabric. Designs may include auspicious motifs like dragons, phoenixes, flowers, or landscapes, each carrying symbolic meanings such as prosperity, harmony, and longevity.



². Visit the website (https://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/culture/embroidery.htm#google_vignette) for further Chinese embroidery

³. Visit the website (<https://sinocultural.com/pages/embroidery-process>) for further embroidery processes.

2. **Preparing the Fabric:** High-quality silk is the preferred material due to its smooth texture and durability. The fabric is stretched onto an embroidery frame or hoop to ensure a taut surface, preventing distortions during stitching.



3. **Choosing Threads:** Silk threads are commonly used for their vibrant colors and glossy finish. These threads are often split into finer strands to achieve subtle shading and intricate details.



4. **Embroidery Techniques:** Embroidery uses various stitching techniques to create intricate designs, with methods chosen based on the design's complexity and texture. Each stitch is crafted with precision, often taking weeks or months to complete, turning fabric into a detailed masterpiece.



5. **Finishing Touches:** Once completed, the fabric is carefully removed from the frame, inspected for imperfections, and treated to enhance durability and preserve its beauty.

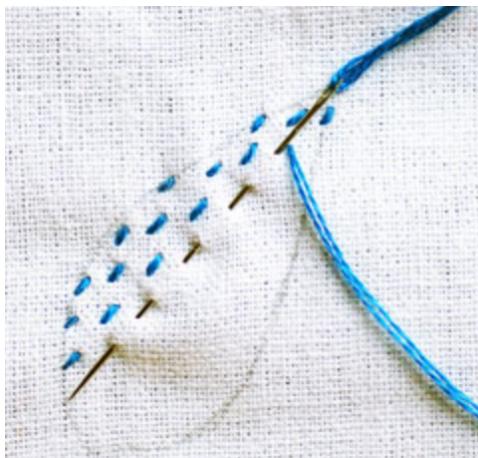


Techniques in Chinese Embroidery

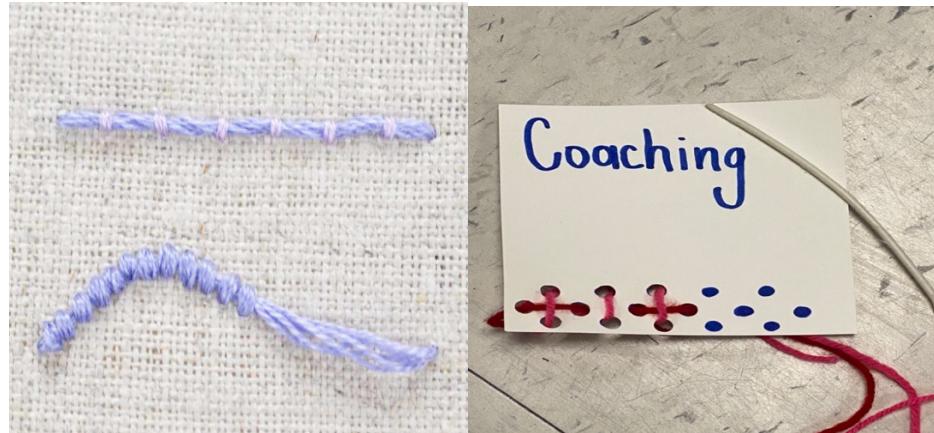
1. **Satin Stitch (平针):** This is the most common technique used for creating smooth, uniform surfaces. Satin stitch involves tightly packed, parallel stitches that create a silky, reflective effect. The satin stitch is often used to create flowing designs that embody the Chinese aesthetic principle of harmony and balance.



2. **Seed Stitch (打子针):** Tiny, isolated stitches are used to create textures and add intricate details to designs. This technique is ideal for depicting fine patterns like flowers or foliage. The scattered appearance of the seed stitch can be associated with prosperity and abundance, as it resembles the scattering of seeds- a traditional symbol of growth, fertility, and good fortune in Chinese culture.



3. **Coaching (盘金)**: Coaching is a decorative technique in which thicker threads, often metallic, are laid on the fabric's surface and secured with small stitches. It is commonly used for ornate designs in imperial garments.



4. **Double-Sided Embroidery (双面绣)**: A hallmark of Suzhou embroidery, this technique involves stitching on both sides of a transparent silk fabric, resulting in two identical or complementary designs without visible knots or threads.

5. **Shading (晕染针)**: A technique used to blend colors seamlessly, creating a painterly effect. It involves varying thread thickness and overlapping stitches to mimic gradients and textures.

6. **Split Thread Technique**: Silk threads are split into finer strands to achieve lifelike details and subtle shading, a hallmark of high-quality Chinese embroidery.

Artistic and Cultural Significance

The process and techniques of Chinese embroidery are deeply tied to cultural values such as harmony, patience, and artistic expression. Each stitch is a testament to the artisan's skill, reflecting centuries of tradition and innovation. Today, Chinese embroidery remains an enduring art form, celebrated for its beauty and symbolic depth, bridging the past and present in Chinese cultural heritage.

Enduring Ideas

The Qixi Festival, often called the "Chinese Valentine's Day," centers on the enduring themes of love, devotion, and reunion. Rooted in the ancient legend of the cowherd Niulang and the weaver girl Zhinü, separated by the Milky Way, the festival reflects the longing for connection despite obstacles. It celebrates the power of love to transcend time and distance, symbolized by the magpies that form a bridge for their annual meeting. These timeless ideas continue to resonate, inspiring expressions of love, family bonds, and the pursuit of unity in modern celebrations.



1. The Power of Love and Devotion

At the heart of the Qixi Festival lies the timeless tale of the Cowherd and Weaver Girl, whose love transcends the barriers of the Milky Way. Their annual reunion symbolizes the strength of love, devotion, and perseverance in the face of adversity. This enduring idea resonates universally, emphasizing that true love requires patience, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment.

2. The Value of Craftsmanship and Skill

The Qixi Festival historically celebrated craftsmanship, particularly in needlework and embroidery. For centuries, young women showcased their skills in artistic competitions, threading needles or creating intricate designs under moonlight. This tradition reflects the enduring appreciation for creativity, diligence, and personal excellence, which remain integral values in Chinese culture.

3. Harmony Between Humanity and the Cosmos

The Qixi Festival's celestial theme underscores the connection between human life and the cosmos. The story of the star-crossed lovers, represented by the stars Altair and Vega, aligns human experiences with the rhythms of nature and the universe. This enduring idea highlights the belief in harmony between earthly and celestial realms, fostering a sense of awe, wonder, and spiritual reflection.

Qixi Festival Art Lesson for Primary Students

I created a 60-minute lesson for those covering non-Western art or non-Western forms of celebrating love. This lesson can be used to enhance a student's understanding of love around the world during the Western celebration of Valentine's Day. This lesson will teach students basic sewing skills and safety. It will take 20 minutes of prep time and 40 minutes for students to sew. This lesson can be scaled to a rigorous activity. Higher grades, such as 4th and 5th grade, can do stitches like the Satin Stitch or Coaching. They can also use the seed stitch to create decorative motifs (flowers or letters)!

National Core Arts Standards Alignment: Creating and Connecting

- Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work
- Essential Question: How does the Qixi Festival reflect the universal themes of love, perseverance, and cultural identity through its traditions and storytelling?

Students will learn about the historical story of the Qixi Festival and make the connection between their ideas of love, perseverance, and cultural identity. Students will come to their conclusion on who, how, and why these concepts are important and how they can differ from each other.

Procedures: To begin the lesson, the teacher will go over the story of the Qixi Festival. The class will discuss important themes such as love, perseverance, and cultural identity. After this, the teacher will begin the project, making sure to remind students to think broadly about the themes they just discussed. The goal of this project is to create an embroidered heart from paper and to highlight a loved one of the student's choosing. Students can also make any shape they desire, as long as the shape is symmetrical. This is to give students a space to showcase a drawing or photo of their loved one. Students will sew around the shape and decorate it with stitching or drawings of their choice. In the middle of the heart will be a picture, either printed or drawn, of the chosen person.

Materials: Students will need the following materials for the lesson: 8 x 11" paper, glue sticks, scissors, markers, pencils, yarn, a hole punch, and a sewing needle.

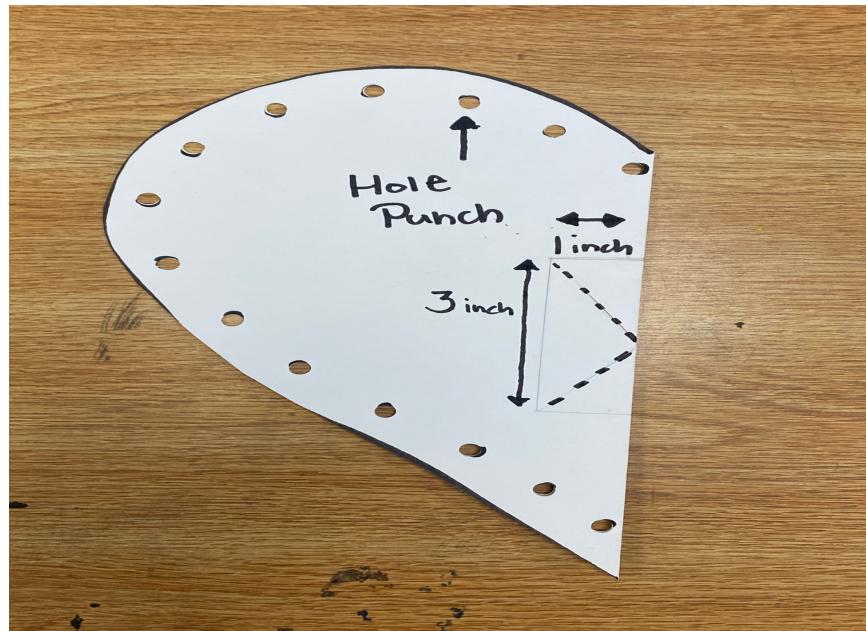


Process for the Studio Project

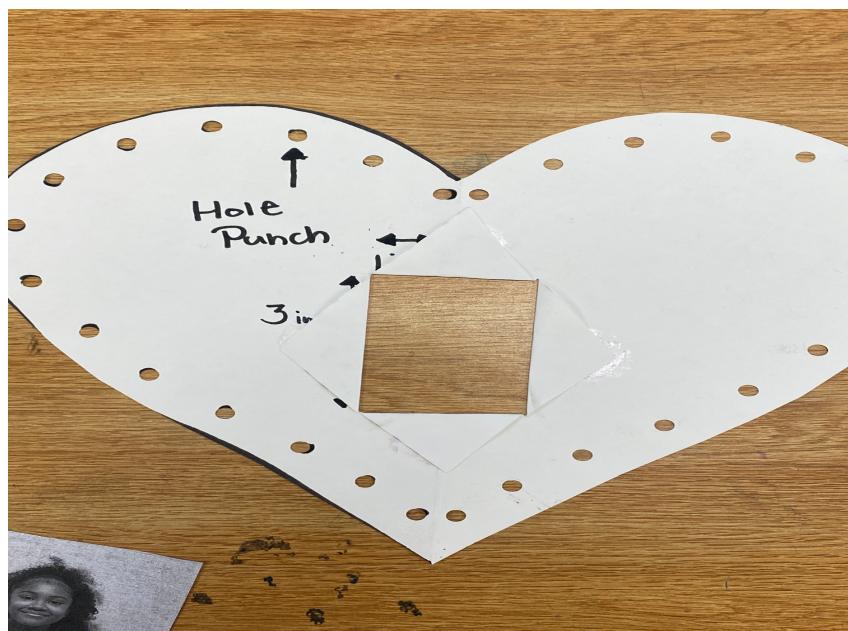
1. Fold your paper in half and draw your shape. Remember that this shape will be symmetrical once cut and opened. It's important to make the shape large enough so that you can create an opening in the middle. For this example, I will be using a heart shape.
2. Add dots to one side to show where you will hole punch. Measure each hole by using your finger or ruler. For younger students, the educator should help them with hole punching.
3. Cut out your shape (heart) by cutting on the line.
4. Use the hole puncher to punch holes in the dots.
5. In the center of the heart, add a 1-inch by 3-inch rectangle

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6. Cut diagonally, starting in the center of the rectangle and stopping at the top and bottom corners. The heart should still be folded in half while doing so. The dotted line shown is where the cuts should occur.



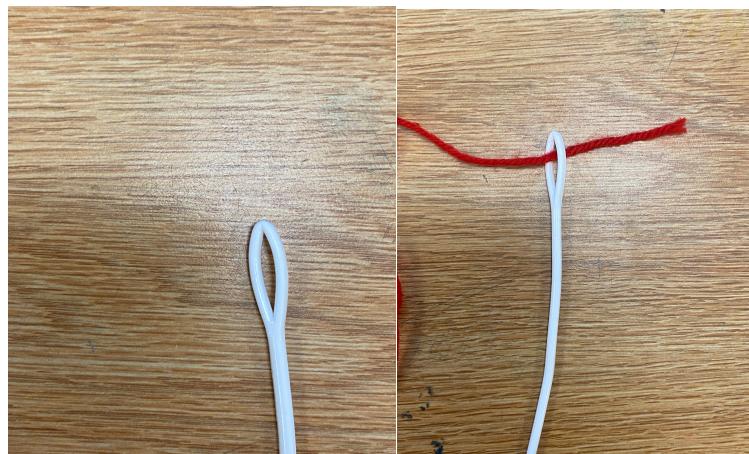
7. Open up the heart and glue down the four flaps from your cut rectangle to one side of the heart.



8. Glue your printed or drawn picture down to the back side of your heart. This is the same side you glued down your flaps. Make sure to center your picture in the opening of your heart.

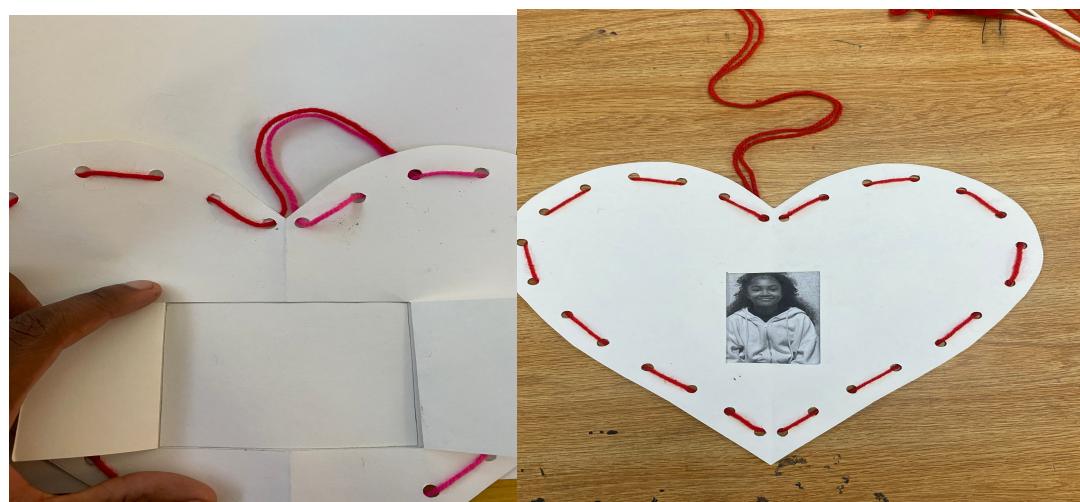
9. Threading the needle

- Cut an arm's length of yarn. (approximately 5 feet). Thread your needle by sticking the end of the yarn through the eye of the needle and knot it.



10. Stitching your heart

- Start by coming up from the bottom of your heart, through the first hole at the top left from the middle of the heart.
- Move on to the next hole by going down from the top of your heart.
- Repeat this pattern until all of your holes have been stitched. This pattern is an example of the Seed Stitch, but students can choose between the three different stitches. (Seed Stitch, Satin Stitch, and Coaching). They can go around their shape and complete the stitches to add a decorative effect to their project.



11. Decoration

- Decorate your heart with messages and pictures.



Assessment: Students' works show knowledge and understanding of the Qixi Festival and its themes. The work also reflects the connection between the student's personal, cultural, and aesthetic context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this lesson will allow students to reflect on the theme of love in art. The student will be able to compare and contrast their ideas of love and perseverance. Love is something that is shared across the world, and students should recognize that other cultures show love differently. Students are also tasked to challenge their own beliefs of love in the sense of only love being for romantic reasons. Students should know that love can be shown amongst family and friends as well.

As an educator, it's important to teach students to be respectful of their own and other's cultures. By showing them the story of the Qixi Festival, students in the Western world can see that non-Western cultures are actively celebrating love. This widens their viewpoint and understanding of the world globally.

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