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# Artistic Characteristics and Fashion Practice of Traditional K'o-ssu in China

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## Abstract

*K'o-ssu is one of the representative textile techniques of ancient China. It was used in the royal court, known to few people in folk life. However, it was not until the 1950s that the K'o-ssu technique was rediscovered. This paper focus on summarising K'o-ssu artistic characteristics through analysing K'o-ssu's materials, patterns and colours by interviewing experts and physical observation. Taking the NE-TIGER brand as an example, this article will discuss the fashion practice of traditional K'o-ssu art in modern life in order to provide modern designers a reference for promoting this traditional Chinese craft and culture by way of sustainable development.*

**Key words:** *K'o-ssu, artistic characteristics, fashion practice, traditional Chinese textile, modern life.*

## Introduction

K'o-ssu is a well-known and representative weaving technique from ancient China that is done entirely by hand, supported by a simple loom, with a history of thousands of years. Since 1949, research on K'o-ssu has mainly focused on the following three aspects: firstly, research on the historical origin of K'o-ssu, “*The study on the origin and propagation of the K'o-ssu*”, written by Li Bin and Li Qiang. By using the method of literature research and the study of textile archaeology, this paper reasonably analysed the technique, propagation process and appellation of K'o-ssu. And they pointed out that the technique of K'o-ssu was produced on the basis of blending the techniques of silk spinning by Han artisans in the western region of China [1]. Secondly, according to the research on the development and evolution of K'o-ssu, “*King of Weaving: Inheritance of China's Traditional K'o-ssu Skill*”, written by Yang Ye, Song dynasty paintings and calligraphy art had already appeared and K'o-ssu had been further developed from the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasty periods. After the establishment of the new China, the K'o-ssu industry became important, but at the same time, there were also a lot of problems, such as the shortage of professionals, bad market circulation, simple art themes and so on [2]. Thirdly, “*Aesthetics features and evolution of K'o-ssu art in Song Dynasty*”, written by Zhang Kangfu and Liu Xinhua, is focused on the artistic characteristics of K'o-ssu and indicates that with the influence of Neo-confucianism and Taoism, the colour of K'o-ssu combined bright and light shades, which on the whole led the art of K'o-ssu colour to

be a calm, fresh, and elegant style in the Song dynasty [3]. However, there are few researches about the innovative application of K'o-ssu. Take “*Some Ideas on Transmission and Innovation of Chinese Traditional Silk K'o-ssu: Exemplified by Design and Production of Ink Painting Silk K'o-ssu Fans*” as an example, which expounds the experience and significance of the design and production process of the K'o-ssu fan and extends thought upon the inheritance and innovation of traditional crafts of K'o-ssu [4] by using the author's personal participation in practical projects. However, overall, few people have connected the art of K'o-ssu with fashion design and carried it forward through innovative practical research.

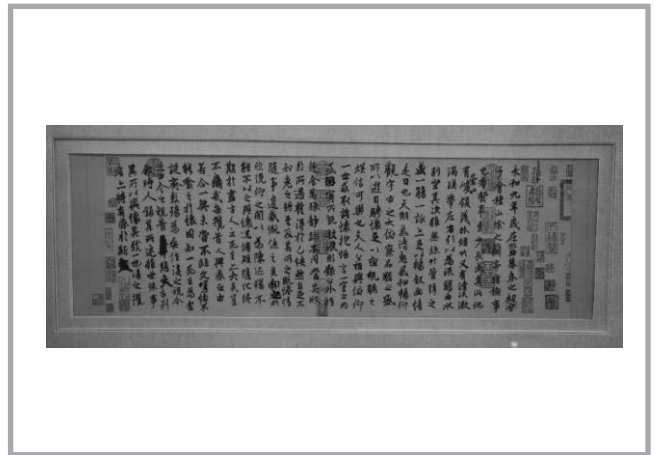
From the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 2017 to the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, at Jiangnan University's folk clothes museum, a team led by the author held an exhibition of Chinese clothes from Li Yulai's collection of Qing Dynasty palace clothes. The exhibition presented nearly 100 works of the collection of Qing Dynasty palace clothes, collected by Mr. Li Yulai, who is a well-known domestic clothing collector. He collected all kinds of palace clothes, such as formal dresses, auspicious dresses, informal dresses, casual dresses and related dress accessories. In the exhibition, there were various categories and themes, different kinds of silk and brocade, as well as exquisite embroidery, which are all treasures of Chinese art and witness to the rise and fall of a dynasty in Chinese history. Among them, a large number of the Qing Dynasty clothes are K'o-ssu clothes that are the epitome of Chinese feudal society's dress etiquette and needlework culture. It not only reflects the hierarchical order of the Qing Dynasty but also uses

special textile and embroidery to represent the highest level of Qing Dynasty in an intangible cultural heritage. In **Figure 1**, we can see a K'o-ssu dragon robe from the Qing dynasty. All the patterns are made by K'o-ssu. In order to further promote and study the K'o-ssu technique, the author led a team to hold a 19-day art exhibition titled “*Carving and Weaving Color: K'o-ssu Art Exhibition*” at Jiangnan University's folk clothes museum on the 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2018. The exhibition was for showing Mr. Wang Yuxiang's works such as K'o-ssu paintings, K'o-ssu Thangka, K'o-ssu clothes and other K'o-ssu mancrafts. In the exhibition, as shown in **Figure 2**, the calligraphy was all made by K'o-ssu to represent Chinese characters. **Figure 3** shows Mr. Wang Yuxiang as a guide for guests at the K'o-ssu exhibition, vividly describing the historical origin, cultural connotation, artistic characteristics, craft skills and design motivation of the works on display. At the same time, the K'o-ssu master showed the process of using the K'o-ssu technique to the public (as shown in **Figure 4**), which, to some extent, conveys the essence of excellent traditional Chinese culture and the style of modern humanistic innovation.

Based on this, this paper focused on the inheritance and renaissance of the national art, which mainly used the method of field research and market research to interpret ancient Chinese K'o-ssu skills with respect to artistic features, and studied how to use K'o-ssu in clothing fashion, especially the application of advanced customisation fashion design, which provides the reference to the national traditional art of modern activation and innovation.



**Figure 1.** Qing dynasty K'o-ssu dragon robe (Collected by Y.L. Li; photographed by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2018).



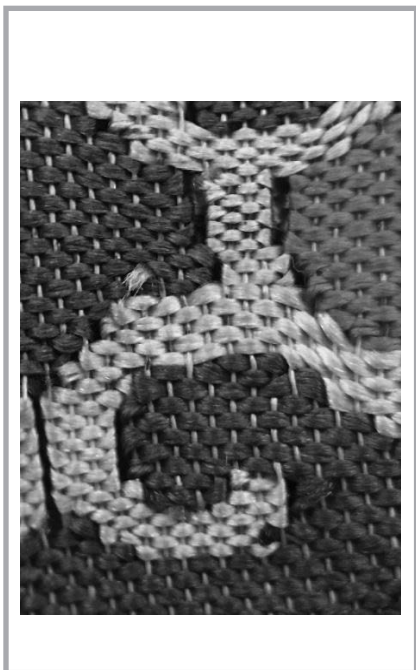
**Figure 2.** K'o-ssu work based on X.Z Wang's calligraphy (Works of Y.X. Wang; photographed by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> December, 2018).



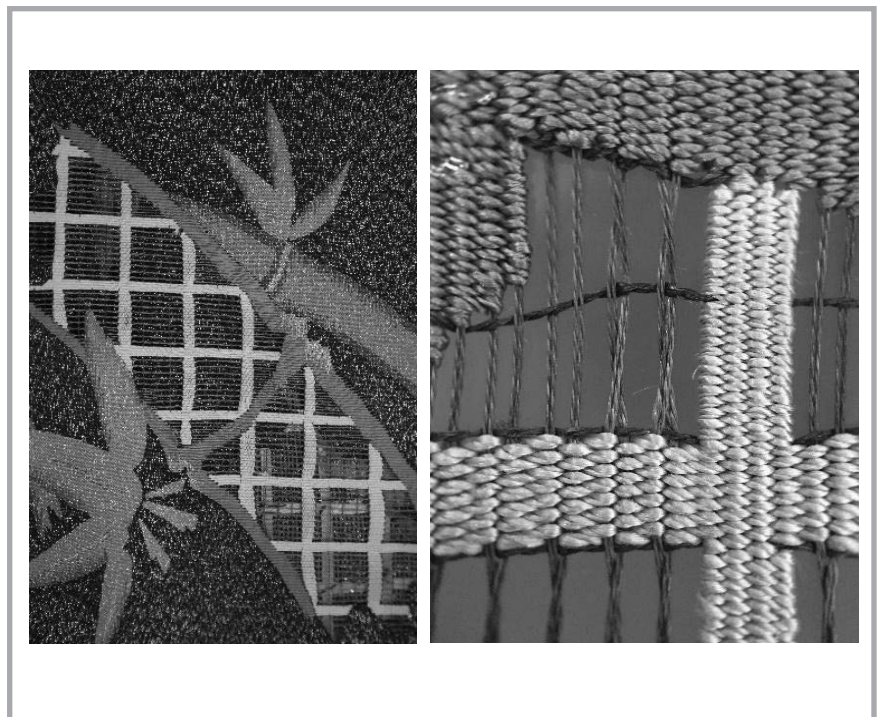
**Figure 3.** Y.X. Wang guiding guests visiting the K'o-ssu exhibition (Photographed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2018).



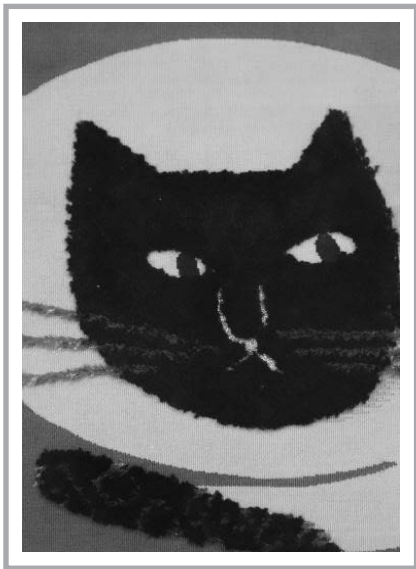
**Figure 4.** K'o-ssu craftsman (X.F. Zhu, Y.X. Wang's daughter-in-law) (Photographed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2018).



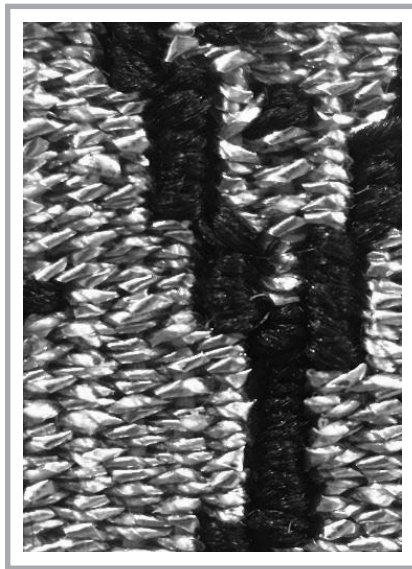
**Figure 5.** K'o-ssu fabric structure (Collected by Y.L. Li; photographed on 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2018).



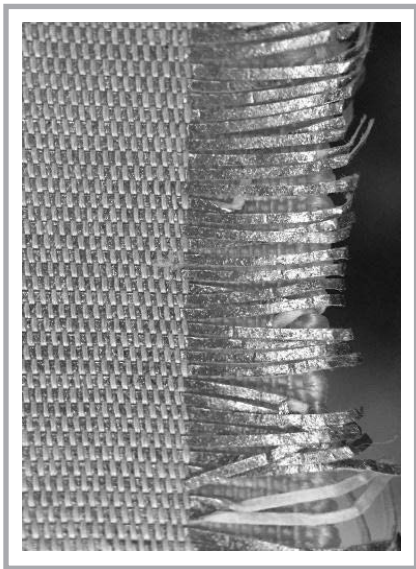
**Figure 6.** „Cut silk” (Works of Y.X. Wang; photographed on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2018).



**Figure 7.** Velvet K'o-ssu (Works of Y.X. Wang; photographed on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2018).



**Figure 8.** Golden K'o-ssu (Works of Y.X. Wang; photographed on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2018).



**Figure 9.** Foil Kesi Silk (Works of Y.X. Wang; photographed on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2018).



**Figure 10.** „Paper Fibres” (Works of Y.X. Wang; photographed on 25<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2018).

### Artistic characteristics of K'o-ssu from a micro perspective

#### Similarity to engraving technology features

K'o-ssu is a technique utilising Chinese silk fibres (It is similar to the comb kilim technique), admired for its lightness and clarity of pattern. K'o-ssu also means “cut silk”, a name that comes from the appearance of cut threads created by the use of colour in the pictorial designs typical of the style (often copies of famous paintings). Unlike continuous weft brocade, in K'o-ssu each colour area is woven from a separate bobbin and natural colour silk

thread is the warp and colored silk thread the weft. It is woven by a special shuttle (as shown in **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**). Before beginning to use K'o-ssu, you need to confirm the painting sketching. Then, according to the colour of the painting sketching, the shuttles with silk threads of the colours (that we have already confirmed) weave into each other. Generally, K'o-ssu texture follows the principles of “wrap thread is thin and weft thread is thick”, “wrap thread is white and weft thread is colorful”, “wrap thread is straight and weft thread is curved” etc. Because the coloured weft covers the upper part of the fabric, the effect of the pattern will not be affected by the shrinkage of the weft.

Aluminum K'o-ssu is a new construction derived from the basic structure above. Aluminum K'o-ssu thread is made of a mixture of raw and ripe silk threads, which is soft. In Japan, they still use the word “絹” (meaning aluminum) for summer clothing belt and high-end curtain shades, which was mentioned in the book: *Cultural history of dyeing and weaving*. The book says “絹” originated in China. “Cut silk” is derived from aluminum K'o-ssu because when people weave yarns, between each thread different sizes of gaps will appear, such as square or cycle holes, which has excellent texture and a hollow effect, displaying a cardiac tomographic. This kind of K'o-ssu was successfully designed by Mr. Wang Yuxiang of Nantong in the late 1990s (shown in **Figure 6**).

#### Different materials make different textures

Is all K'o-ssu the same? Why are some K'o-ssu thick or thin? This is because of the different materials, so that different textures can be made.

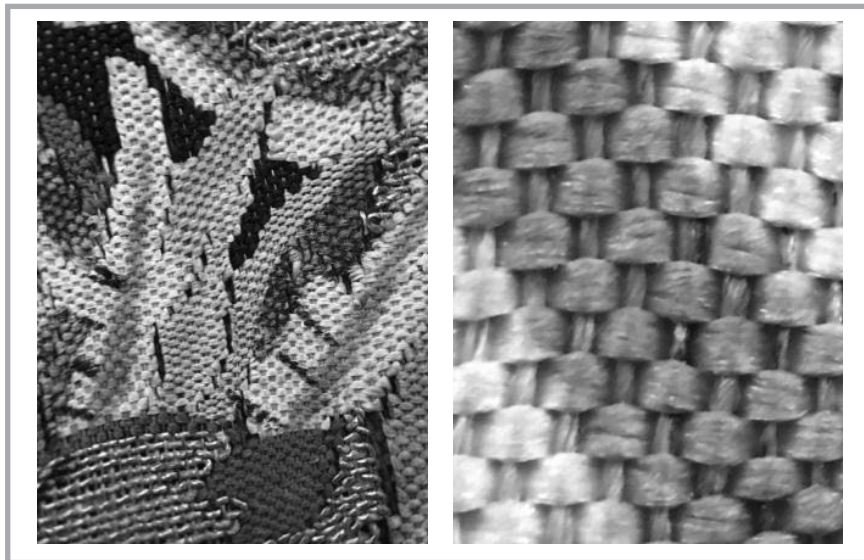
Firstly, velvet can be one of the materials. K'o-ssu can be added into velvet as a material. Velvet K'o-ssu originated in the “Kemao” technique (“Kemao” is another technique from ancient Egypt). It spread in China from the Han dynasty to the Sui and Tang Dynasties [5]. At that time, Velvet K'o-ssu was gradually being replaced by K'o-ssu that used normal silk fibres (shown in **Figure 7**). It was mostly used to represent the texture of animal fur. In addition to common wool, the material was usually combined with peacock feathers to create a new pattern.

Secondly, golden threads could be another material. K'o-ssu with gold material added is called golden K'o-ssu [6]. As early as in the Qing Dynasty, Chinese K'o-ssu craftsmen would often weave gold thread as fibre into the emperor's dragon robe, consequently we can see a large number of golden K'o-ssu dragon robes. In modern times, Wang Yuxiang created a rare golden K'o-ssu with Thangka. As shown in **Figure 8**, this work is rendered in black, and 24-karat gold is used to depict the Buddha. The surrounding Buddhist symbols, the aura and lotus stand, are also represented by golden K'o-ssu of 24-karat gold, making the whole image noble.

Thirdly, people could use foil as material as well. K'o-ssu with foil materials added



**Figure 11.** Dragon „K'o-ssu Painting” from the Qing Dynasty (Collected by Y.L. Li; photographed on 5<sup>th</sup> Jan., 2018).



**Figure 12.** Hand-painted K'o-ssu from the Qing Dynasty (Collected by Y.L. Li; photographed on 5<sup>th</sup> Jan., 2018).

is called foil K'o-ssu. The fabric presents a fantastic and gorgeous luster, as shown in **Figure 9**. In Japan, there are some fragments of foil K'o-ssu preserved in The Sakura Yard and Japanese books describing this kind of K'o-ssu, originating in China. Another K'o-ssu, “Paper Fibres”, was combined with foil K'o-ssu to enable the fabric surface to faintly reflect the floral specimens on the foil, shown in **Figure 10**.

#### **Pattern and color features combined with painting**

In the detailed processing of K'o-ssu patterns, painting is applied to K'o-ssu to make the colour transition more natural. This unique colour expression technique is called “K'o-ssu Painting” and arose in the Song Dynasty [7]. The rise of “K'o-ssu Painting” was closely related to the meticulous flower and bird painting that had become an important theme. The Song Dynasty was the mature period of Chinese art. Landscape flowers and birds gradually replaced figure and religious painting as common painting themes. In addition, Song Huizong, the ruler of the Northern Song Dynasty, was good at painting figures, flowers, birds, and landscapes, especially flower and bird painting, which caused court and folk painting to follow suit and led the social fashion for a while [8]. Chinese K'o-ssu works imitate meticulous landscape and flower-and-bird paintings and focus on weaving original paintings onto silk fabrics, endeavouring to retain the essence of the original painting. However, flower-and-bird painting is rich in

colour and complex in tone, which makes it difficult to rely on a single colour expression in the weaving process. It is difficult to achieve the effect of the original painting only by the colour change of silk thread in the weaving process to grasp the tone. In weaving an original painting, the introduction of coloured painting can fully realise the tone, which is difficult to achieve, objectively presenting the essence of the original painting. From physical samples, it can be seen that due to the fact that it is difficult for colour threads to express the colour of the original painting, local dot dyeing and colour rendering are used to achieve the purpose of a natural transition. By the Qing Dynasty, “K'o-ssu Painting” had began to be widely used in clothing. It can be seen in **Figures 11** and **12** that the colour treatment of dragon patterns in dragon robes, the black dragon's eyebrows, pink lines in the dragon's horns, etc., were all represented in paintings. Through the ingenious combination of K'o-ssu and painting, unique pattern design features were formed, which are worth learning in modern fashion design.

#### **Fashion practice of K'o-ssu in modern life**

K'o-ssu was always the exclusive textile skill of courts and emperors in ancient times due to the exquisite and expensive materials and workmanship. Moreover, ordinary folk were not allowed to use it. Therefore, in modern times, there have not been many people who know the technology, and those who know are

mainly in Suzhou. As the technology of K'o-ssu is relatively difficult, it takes a relatively long time to learn, and the production is slow. The technique was once on the brink of extinction [9]. In recent years, the technique has attracted the attention of the national government and local governments. At present, Chinese K'o-ssu has entered the list of China's intangible cultural heritage. Many scholars and people believe that in ancient China, K'o-ssu was applied on the whole of clothing. But at this moment, we often apply the K'o-ssu technique to parts of clothing, not only on the whole, to adapt to the needs of modern people and keep pace with the times. Research results of the technique need to be promoted in society through various forms; the craft should expand from just artistic appreciation to practicality; and its design should meet daily needs in line with the times. These are the main ways for the craft to move into the future [10].

#### **Market research on the innovative application of K'o-ssu**

In order to grasp the popularity of K'o-ssu in modern society and discuss the feasibility of the practice of K'o-ssu in fashion, the paper designed 10 questions from the perspectives of art, technology, application and fashion, and conducted surveys among people of different genders and ages. After 10 days of interviews, collection and sorting, a total of 1247 valid questionnaires were obtained. **Table 1** shows the statistical results of the questionnaire survey. According to the survey, firstly, with the publicity of



**Figure 13.** „Twin Pheonix Dwelling on Peony Flowers” K’o-ssu dress. (Works of Z.F. Zhang).



**Figure 14.** „Twin Pheonix Dwelling on Peony Flowers” K’o-ssu dress from the back. (Works of Z.F. Zhang).

**Table 1.** Market research on the innovative application of K’o-ssu.

Number	Questions	Choices, Y/N	Amount	Proportion, %
1	Do you know Chinese traditional K’o-ssu?	Y	986	79.07
		N	261	20.93
2	Can you think of more than two artistic features of K’o-ssu?	Y	95	7.62
		N	1152	92.38
3	Do you think the application of K’o-ssu in modern society is feasible?	Y	1105	88.61
		N	142	11.39
4	Are you looking forward to the application of K’o-ssu in fashion design?	Y	1098	88.05
		N	149	11.95
5	Do you think K’o-ssu represents a superior level of traditional Chinese weaving?	Y	958	76.82
		N	289	23.18
6	Do you think K’o-ssu is suitable for ready-to-wear?	Y	538	43.14
		N	709	56.86
7	Do you think K’o-ssu is suitable for haute couture?	Y	1159	92.94
		N	88	7.06
8	Do you think the innovative products of K’o-ssu are practical?	Y	745	59.74
		N	502	40.26
9	Do you think the innovative products of K’o-ssu are beautiful?	Y	1096	87.89
		N	151	12.11
10	Is there lots of space for improvement in the fashion practice of K’o-ssu?	Y	869	69.69
		N	378	30.31

the museum exhibition and online media, people’s understanding of K’o-ssu has been greatly improved. Secondly, despite the fact that K’o-ssu is known, the public is not familiar with its specific artistic characteristics. Thirdly, K’o-ssu is extremely feasible in modern society, and has important practical and aesthetic value. Fourthly, K’o-ssu is more suitable for haute couture than for use in ready-to-wear. Finally, there is lots of space for

improvement in the fashion practice of K’o-ssu.

#### Haute couture of K’o-ssu in the NE • TIGER Brand

As a regal silk fabric, K’o-ssu can be hand washed and is easy to preserve. In the field of haute couture, large-area overall application or local embellishment of K’o-ssu is one of the most ap-

propriate and typical design techniques. Founded by Zhang Zhifeng in 1982, NE • TIGER is China’s top luxury brand. As the guardian and inheritor of Chinese clothing culture, NE • TIGER has always adhered to the design concept of “linking ancient and modern times and integrating Chinese and Western cultures” and is committed to reviving Chinese luxury culture and brands. The K’o-ssu skill has always been a traditional element that the NE • TIGER brand often draws lessons from. One of its most representative and influential fashion practices is the design of a “Twin Pheonix Dwelling on Peony Flowers”. The design is inspired by traditional Chinese elements: the phoenix, which was once used by the royal family, and the peony, which has been revered as the national flower since ancient times. It is decorated with Chinese red as the main colour, interwoven with gold thread and decorated with peacock blue. It is elegant and unique. The whole set of fine clothes adopts seven milestone techniques in the development history of K’o-ssu: normal K’o-ssu is adopted in the abdomen part; the collar and cuffs are made of bright K’o-ssu; the chest is made of aluminum K’o-ssu; the waist is made of lead foil K’o-ssu; shoulders are made of velvet K’o-ssu, and on the back, carved K’o-ssu and purple K’o-ssu are used, respectively. **Figures 13** and **14** show the front and under sides of the garment, respectively.

This is the first costume woven by seven kinds of K'o-ssu techniques, which were once on the verge of extinction. It can be called a modern miracle. On April 16, 2010, this "Twin Pheonix Dwelling on Peony Flowers" K'o-ssu fine dress was permanently acquired by the Capital Museum. This is the first time that a Chinese independent brand has won this honour, bringing bright prospects for the revival of Chinese K'o-ssu, a world-renowned skill.

## Conclusions

K'o-ssu, with the reputation of "one inch K'o-ssu, one inch gold", is one of the highlights of Chinese silk crafts. It was used by emperors in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Compared to other silk crafts, K'o-ssu is not only an appreciable collection work, but also very practical. Because of the special technique employed in the making process, it can be used to make clothes and other goods. Thus, in modern times, K'o-ssu needs to be protected as well as changed to integrate ancient K'o-ssu into the mainstream of modern society and become an everyday aspect of people's daily lives; that is to continue K'o-ssu, that special Chinese traditional technique.

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- Resin and chlororesin acids
- Saturated and unsaturated fatty acids
- Phenol and phenolic compounds (guaiacols, catechols, vanillin, veratrols)
- Tetrachlorophenol, Pentachlorophenol (PCP)
- Hexachlorocyclohexane (lindane)
- Aromatic and polyaromatic hydrocarbons
- Benzene, Hexachlorobenzene
- Phthalates
- Carbohydrates
- Glycols
- Polychloro-Biphenyls (PCB)
- Glyoxal
- Tin organic compounds

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