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The Artification of a Traditional Craft: An Institutional Analysis of Shu Brocade

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Abstract:
This study employs George Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art as its theoretical framework, examining the artistic attributes and social legitimacy of Shu Brocade from a sociological perspective. The core elements of this theory – artist, artwork, the public, and art system – are applied to the Shu Brocade artistic sphere as represented by China's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) system, thereby defining its constitutive mechanisms and interactive logic. The research indicates that Shu Brocade creators (artists) attain cultural legitimacy within the ICH framework through their status as inheritors, functioning as cultural practitioners within a collaborative network. Shu Brocade (artwork) is conferred social artistic status within this system through selection and exhibition processes. The public, as appreciators and consumers, exert a reciprocal influence on creation and preservation mechanisms through aesthetic judgement and cultural consumption; while the art system (ICH framework) transforms Shu Brocade weaving techniques from traditional craftsmanship into socially recognised artistic practice through institutional procedures such as inventory recognition and inheritor selection. This paper conceives Shu Brocade as a cyclical social process: the artefacts of its creators are imbued with artistic identity through the screening and symbolisation of institutional mechanisms, completing their artistic genesis through public understanding and acceptance.

Keywords:
Shu Brocade, institutional theory of art, intangible cultural heritage

1.Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage represented by spinning, dyeing, weaving, and embroidery constitutes one of the quintessential manifestations of China's outstanding traditional culture. Issues concerning its preservation and transmission have consistently occupied a prominent position within contemporary academic discourse [1, 2]. he artistic value embodied by weaving and embroidery techniques, along with their criteria for evaluation, fundamentally depend upon our understanding of the very essence of 'art'. The evolution of aesthetic history—from mimetic theory, expressive theory, and formalism to contemporary institutional art theory—reveals a historical shift in the definition of art [3-5]. This shift necessitates re-examining the artistic identity of traditional crafts within modern society through new theoretical frameworks. This raises the question: how do cultural creations historically regarded as crafts achieve their institutional transformation into 'artworks' within the modern social context [1, 2, 6].

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The theoretical predicament encountered by traditional aesthetics when interpreting ready-made artworks such as Duchamp's Fountain reveals the limitations inherent in defining 'art' [7, 8]. It is precisely these limitations that provide an opportunity to re-examine the modern identity of traditional crafts like Shu Brocade. Past research on Shu Brocade has predominantly focused on its technical mastery, distinctive patterns, and profound cultural significance [9]. However, in a contemporary context where 'beauty' is no longer regarded as a sufficient condition for art, mere formal and cultural interpretations prove inadequate to explain the social logic underpinning Shu Brocade's status as an 'artwork' [9].

A review of domestic and international research reveals that scholarly contributions concerning Shu Brocade have established a relatively systematic body of knowledge, providing a solid foundation for this study. Domestic research primarily explores the historical origins, cultural value, conservation measures, and industrialisation process of Shu Brocade [10]. Government-led recognition within intangible cultural heritage (ICH) inventories, interpretative work by academic institutions, the technical practices of inheritors, and the development of cultural and creative industries collectively construct the social recognition system for Shu Brocade's artistic identity [2, 11]. Notably, the integration of cultural creativity with tourism has enabled Shu Brocade to assume new institutional roles within market mechanisms [12, 13]. Though these studies do not explicitly employ art institutional theory, their analyses objectively reflect the institutional support for Shu Brocade's legitimisation among various actors within the 'artworld'. By contrast, international scholars have placed greater emphasis on Shu Brocade's position within the Silk Road trade system and its cross-cultural dissemination value. These findings reveal the process by which Shu Brocade has been re-recognised and redefined within the global artistic context [6, 9, 10].

Despite the abundance of research findings mentioned above, these studies have generally remained confined to historical narratives, cultural interpretations, or industrial analyses. There remains a lack of systematic analysis, grounded in the institutional perspective of the sociology of art, concerning the mechanisms underpinning the construction of Shu Brocade's identity as an 'artwork'. To address this theoretical gap, this study introduces George Dickie's theory of the artworld as its core theoretical framework [14]. This theory shifts the question of defining 'art' from an essentialist inquiry towards a social institutional analysis, emphasising that an artwork's identity is not an inherent property but is conferred by a social system known as the 'artworld'[14]. Owing to its logical consistency and strong explanatory power, this theory is regarded as one of the key frameworks for understanding the functioning of contemporary art institutions [15, 16].

Accordingly, this study aims to explore the institutionalisation pathways of Shu Brocade within the contemporary intangible cultural heritage framework, using Dickie's institutional theory of art as its analytical foundation. The research will focus on examining how key elements constituting Shu Brocade's 'artworld' interact to forge its identity as an 'artwork'. The research encompasses the social processes through which Shu Brocade attained institutionalised status, its adaptive mechanisms within modern communication systems [10], and, building upon this theoretical framework, diagnosing developmental bottlenecks while proposing optimization strategies. Concurrently, by analysing institutional practices in marketization, educational promotion, and cross-cultural dissemination, it explores novel possibilities for the living transmission and innovative development of intangible cultural heritage [9, 17].

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This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing Shu Brocade as a single case study [18]. It utilises literature analysis and direct interpretation methods to examine the social construction of its artistic identity [18-20]. The study aims to transcend the traditional analytical paradigm centred on form and cultural connotations in Shu Brocade research, broadening the discourse to encompass the wider perspectives of the sociology of art and institutional studies. This approach seeks to provide new theoretical footholds and analytical pathways for research into the artistic attributes of intangible cultural heritage.

2.Theoretical Framework: George Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art

2.1. The Emergence of the 'Artworld': From Danto to Dickie

To explore the logic underpinning the construction of Shu Brocade's status as an artwork, this study adopts George Dickie's institutional theory of art as its core analytical framework. This theory breaks away from traditional aesthetic approaches centred on the 'essence of art', shifting towards understanding art through sociological and institutional structures. It offers a procedural and relational explanation to the question, 'What is art?' This chapter aims to trace the origins of the artworld theory, its core concepts, and its analytical value, laying the theoretical foundation for subsequent case studies.

The concept of the 'artworld' was first proposed by the American philosopher Arthur Danto to explain how ordinary objects come to be regarded as artworks in contemporary art. Danto contends that recognising an object as art necessitates 'an atmosphere of artistic theory and knowledge of art history'—that is, the 'artworld' existing within a specific cultural context [16, 21-23]. George Dickie further systematised and theorised this framework, explicitly positing that the 'artworld' constitutes the social institutional structure underpinning the existence of artworks. This gave rise to the influential'institutional theory' of art [15, 24, 25].

2.2. The Institutional Definition of Art: The Core of the Early Theory

In his 1974 work Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis, Dickie articulated the core of his early theory: a taxonomic definition of the artwork. He posited that an artwork is an artefact created within the broad artworld and accorded a specific status within it [14, 24]. This definition centres on three key elements: relational property, classificatory meaning, and conferring the status.

First, Dickie critically reinterprets the relational property within traditional art theories [26]. Past aesthetic theories, such as mimetic theory , expressive theory, and formal theory, respectively focused on visible connections between artworks and their subjects, the creator's emotions, and artistic form [27]. Dickie contends that the most fundamental relational property of an artwork is not an externally visible formal relationship, but rather the invisible social connection it forms with the institutionalised system of the artworld. An object becomes a work of art precisely because it is incorporated into the institutional rules and operational procedures of the artworld. Secondly, conferring status constitutes the core function of the artworld. Only when an agent of the artworld bestows upon an artefact the qualification of being a candidate for public aesthetic experience, the object then attains the identity of a work of art. These agents—artists, critics, scholars, media practitioners, aestheticians, and others—collectively form a loosely connected social network [14]. Crucially, this conferral of status does not imply an aesthetic value judgement but merely

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establishes the object's categorical significance as an artwork.

2.3. Revision and Development of the Theory: Five Definitions in the Later Art-World Theory

Addressing critiques of the early theory concerning the ambiguous concept of the artworld and unclear structural hierarchy, Dickie proposed five interrelated, circularly defined core elements in his later theory, thereby reconstructing the theoretical framework of art institutional theory. He defined the artworld as a specific institutional framework or cultural construction, comprising five interdependent elements: artists, artworks, the public, the artworld itself, and the art system.

Artists are defined as individuals capable of comprehending and participating in the artistic creation process [14, 28]. They function not only as creative agents but also as interpreters of meaning; their creative acts manifest as intentional, culturally learned activities directed towards the public, rather than isolated individual endeavours [29].

Artworks are artefacts created for display to the artworld's public. Later definitions deemphasised the earlier emphasis on qualification for appreciation, instead highlighting their core function—as cultural vehicles for interaction with the artworld's public, embodying institutionalised social purposes.

The public denotes a social group possessing sufficient artistic knowledge and interpretative capacity to engage meaningfully with exhibited works. Within the artworld, the public and the artist share equally significant roles, jointly constituting the minimal unit of artistic activity.

The artworld may be conceptualised as the overarching framework comprising all independent artistic systems [28]. Different art systems—such as painting, literature, and music—provide specific institutional contexts and social support structures for artists' creative practice and the display of their works. Due to its open and expansive nature, this concept accommodates the continuous evolution and renewal of artistic forms, reflecting that institutional theory focuses not on art forms themselves, but on the underlying human cultural activities and social practices.

The art system, meanwhile, constitutes the institutional framework upon which artists rely to present their works to the artworld's public [24, 25].

These five concepts form an interdependent, logically cyclical system. Dickie contends that the meaning of artistic production is not determined by any single factor, but is jointly constructed by artists, the public, the art system, and their interrelationships. This cyclical structure is not a theoretical flaw but a necessary mechanism revealing the essence of artistic activity. It demonstrates that art's existence depends upon institutionalised social structures: only within these structures can the interaction between creators, audiences, and their cultures generate art's social meaning and symbolic value. In other words, institutional theory of art reveals the process by which art is defined, recognised, and reproduced within social institutions.

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3.Case Definition: Shu Brocade as Intangible Cultural Heritage

In the contemporary context, the significance of Shu Brocade extends far beyond its traditional definition as a handicraft. It has been integrated into the national-level cultural preservation framework, namely the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) system [9]. This chapter aims to clarify the official definition, cultural attributes, and holistic concept of Shu Brocade within this institutional framework by reviewing relevant literature.

Within China's ICH system, the officially designated object of protection is not the finished 'Shu Brocade' product but rather the Shu Brocade weaving techniques. On May 20, 2006, this technique was inscribed on the first batch of the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (No. VIII-16) with the approval of the State Council of the People's Republic of China. This designation institutionally established that the core value of Shu Brocade lies not in the material product itself, but in the enduring knowledge system and human-centered craft practices that underpin it [9, 10]. According to official documents issued by the General Office of the State Council, intangible cultural heritage refers to traditional cultural expressions and cultural spaces that are passed down through generations and are closely related to social life. Within this definitional framework, Shu Brocade is classified under the category of "traditional knowledge and skills, as well as their associated instruments, objects, and handicraft products" [10]. At the macro level of national cultural strategy, textile, dyeing, and embroidery projects represented by Shu Brocade are regarded as one of the most vital components of fine traditional Chinese culture [2]. It is also recognized as a key symbol and core cultural asset of the regional Bashu culture [10].

As a national intangible cultural heritage, Shu Brocade has thus gained institutional validation and cultural legitimacy for its multifaceted value [6]. Firstly, on the historical and cultural level, Shu Brocade is regarded as a testament to the developmental trajectory of Chinese civilisation, with its patterns and physical artefacts providing invaluable material evidence for studying ancient society, economy, and culture [10]. Secondly, in terms of craftsmanship and aesthetics, Shu Brocade rep-resents the pinnacle of Chinese silk weaving techniques. Its distinctive weaving structure – featuring coloured warp threads and patterned weft threads – combined with intricate pattern compositions and an elegant colour system, collectively demonstrate its extraordinary aesthetic value [9]. Moreover, the artistic principle that every motif carries meaning, and every meaning signifies auspiciousness positions Shu Brocade as a vital vessel for social-cultural memory and emotional expression, symbolising the populace's shared aspirations for happiness and good fortune.

Within China's intangible cultural heritage protection framework, Shu Brocade denotes not merely a specific textile but constitutes a dynamic, systemic cultural ecosystem centred on the 'Shu Brocade Weaving Technique' [9]. This ecosystem encompasses the craft process (from pattern design, dot-pattern drafting, and floral knot-making to finished weaving), its custodians (representative inheritors mastering the techniques), material carriers and tools (such as the wooden loom known as huā lóu), and the cultural spaces to which it is anchored (Chengdu's 'City of Brocade' and its traditions of production and display) [9, 10]. In this sense, Shu Brocade transcends the static notion of a craft object to become a category of cultural heritage established through state institutions, imbued with cultural symbolism and dynamic transmission significance. This institutionalised identity provides a robust case foundation for subsequently analysing its ratification process through Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art.

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4.Discussion: Constituent Elements of the 'Intangible Heritage Community' from an Art Institutionalism Perspective

As Arthur Danto observed, for an object to be regarded as art, one must transcend its visible form and rely upon "the atmosphere of an art theory and the knowledge of art history"—that is, a social institutional context. Consequently, understanding the artistic attributes of Shu Brocade cannot be confined to its weaving texture and visual patterns; it necessitates examining the institutional structures within which it is embedded. This paper employs George Dickie's theory of the artworld as its analytical framework, interpreting Shu Brocade within its social-institutional context. According to Dickie's theory, the artworld constitutes an interconnected, mutually defining whole comprising five elements: artists, artworks, public, the artworld, and the art system. Adopting this perspective, this chapter conceptualises China's contemporary Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) system as Shu Brocade's artworld, exploring the institutional logic of its constituent elements [2].

First, the artist (Shu Brocade creator).

Within Dickie's framework, artist denotes an actor who engages in creation by virtue of their understanding of art. This understanding of art constitutes a culturally acquired characteristic. For Shu Brocade, such understanding manifests as profound mastery of craft traditions, historical contexts, and symbolic systems such as the principle that every design carries meaning, and every meaning signifies auspiciousness [2, 28]. The term participation in creation emphasises that Shu Brocade production constitutes a collaborative social process—involving multiple roles such as painters, weavers, designers, and researchers who collectively fulfil cultural functions [29]. Consequently, the identity of artist is socially recognised and conferred within the institutionalised framework of 'intangible cultural heritage' [10, 29].

Second, the artwork (Shu Brocade).

According to Dickie (1997), an artwork is defined as an artefact created for display to the artworld public [9, 29]. Shu Brocade exemplifies this definition. It is not merely a material artefact but a product embodying social intent and cultural value, whose very existence presupposes being 'displayed' and 'understood'. Precisely due to its high degree of complexity in aesthetics, craftsmanship, and cultural symbolism, Shu Brocade has been selected as a cultural expression within the intangible cultural heritage system [2, 6, 10].

Thirdly, the Public.

Dickie defines the public as "those who are, to some extent, prepared to understand the displayed object." Within the institutional context of Shu Brocade, this group encompasses tourists, ordinary citizens, scholars, and collectors, collectively constituting the reception and reproduction of artistic meaning [2]. The public's understanding of Shu Brocade manifests not only as appreciation of its craftsmanship but also involves recognition of its intangible cultural heritage status, cultural symbolism, and regional identity. This act of recognition imbues artistic production with social significance, transforming the display of Shu Brocade into a process of cultural interaction [2, 10].

Fourth, the Artworld and the Artworld System.

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Dickie posits that the artworld constitutes the aggregate of all art systems. For Shu Brocade, its artworld comprises a set of institutionalised practices dedicated to skill transmission, innovation, and dissemination [30]. This system encompasses not only traditional weaving and cultural performances but also incorporates emerging forms such as digitalisation and AI-driven design [31]. demonstrating both institutional openness and evolutionary capacity. At the core of this structure lies the central art system: China's intangible cultural heritage protection framework. Through mechanisms such as inventory recognition, inheritor programmes, and official exhibitions, it provides institutional support for Shu Brocade's legitimate status and societal dissemination [6, 10, 32]. Within this operational framework, Shu Brocade is continuously identified, disseminated, and reproduced as art [31].

Dickie's Institutional Theory of Art manifests a cyclical structure in the case of Shu Brocade: within the intangible cultural heritage framework (art system), creators (artists) produce Shu Brocade (artworks) through cultural interpretation and technical participation, presenting them to audiences capable of understanding their significance. This process is structured and sustained by an institutionalised artworld, forming an interdependent social structure that establishes and perpetuates Shu Brocade's artistic identity.

5.Conclusions

This study employs George Dickie's (1974) institutional theory of art as its theoretical framework. Through a case study of the nationally designated intangible cultural heritage Shu Brocade, it systematically examines the institutional logic underpinning the transformation of traditional weaving and embroidery techniques from crafts to artworks [1]. Findings indicate that Shu Brocade's status as an artwork does not derive from inherent aesthetic value [9], but rather constitutes a socially constructed outcome shaped through interactions and recognition within the institutionalised network of the artworld involving multiple actors. In contemporary China, the core mechanism of this 'artworld' is the 'intangible cultural heritage protection system' [10]. Through institutional procedures such as inventory recognition and the selection of representative inheritors, this system has played a pivotal role in conferring identity upon Shu Brocade [2, 11].

The primary research conclusions may be summarised as follows. Firstly, artists (i.e., Shu Brocade creators) are institutionally recognised within the intangible heritage framework through their official status as bearers. Leveraging their profound understanding of Shu Brocade techniques and cultural significance, they establish collaborative networks spanning design, production, and research, thereby becoming the cultural agents driving artistic creation [10]. Secondly, artworks (i.e., Shu Brocade), as artefacts completed by creators within collaborative networks, are imbued with a social artistic status transcending their material form through selection and display within the intangible cultural heritage system [6, 9]. Thirdly, the public constitutes a diverse cohort that interprets and evaluates Shu Brocade. Through consumption, appreciation, and media dissemination, they reproduce and enerate feedback, thereby influencing adjustments to creators' practices and institutional strategies [10]. Fourthly, the art system (intangible cultural heritage framework) , functioning as a social institution that provides legitimacy, transforms the traditional skill of 'Shu Brocade weaving techniques' into a culturally recognised artistic achievement through procedures such as national-level inventories, inheritor evaluations, festival exhibitions, and official promotion [2, 10].

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The core argument of this study is that the Shu Brocade case demonstrates an operational model of the artworld that both aligns with and diverges from Dickie's classic formulation. The 'artworld' described by Dickie is a loosely organised network spontaneously formed within society, comprising artists, critics, gallery owners, and others [14]. In contrast, the system underpinning Shu Brocade reveals a top-down, highly institutionalised structure centred on state authority [2]. Within this framework, the conferring of artistic status is no longer the prerogative of dispersed individuals but of unified state institutions; whose operational procedures have shifted from traditional informal norms to legally codified standardised institutional processes [11].

Consequently, this study posits that within China's intangible cultural heritage context, Dickie's theory of artistic institutions manifests as a state-institutionalised variant. Within this variant, the state functions not merely as an actor within the artworld, but as its architect and central driving force. This observation does not negate institutional theory, but rather extends and concretises its operational mechanisms across diverse socio-political structures. Consequently, it enriches the theoretical scope of institutional theory while providing new empirical pathways for its cross-cultural applicability.

The Shu Brocade artworld , constituted by the aforementioned elements, has formed its own distinct domain within the broader artistic field composed of other art systems such as painting, literature, and music. It assumes the function of conferring the social status of 'artwork' [7, 14]. Consequently, Shu Brocade attains its socially recognised status as 'art' within the cyclical structure of creator (artist) – artefact (Shu Brocade) – artistic system (intangible cultural heritage framework) – public [7, 8, 14].

The academic significance of this study lies in its departure from previous research that predominantly examined the artistic nature of Shu Brocade from from the perspectives of formal aesthetics and symbolic meaning [10]. This paper s shifts its analytical focus toward social structures and institutional frameworks to elucidate the logic underpinning the formation of its artistic status [1]. Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative case study approach centred on literature analysis [18, 20]. Through systematic review and direct interpretation of policy documents, academic monographs, journal articles, and news materials, it delineates the operational mechanisms and logical structure of the intangible cultural heritage system. It should be noted, however, that this study's limitations lie in its focus on institutional and societal analyses, failing to comprehensively address the technical, economic, and cultural complexities of Shu Brocade [33, 34]. Future research may build upon this foundation to further expand and deepen these dimensions.

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