

## **JAPANESE MOTIFS REVOLUTIONIZE SILK ART IN LATE MING DYNASTY**

**Wu, X.**

College of Fashion and Design, Donghua University, Shanghai, China

---

**Abstract:** This paper explores the influence of Japanese textile patterns on Ming silks during the medieval to early modern periods. Through an analysis of a group of rare and valuable silks with motifs from that era, this study compares the decorative arts of China and Japan and identifies three main methods of decorations that matured during that period. These decoration methods, including Tsujiga-hana dye, Suri-haku, and Nui-haku, were used for tie-dyeing, painting, embroidering, and sticking metallic foils. The paper highlights the similarities in the motifs and patterns used in both Chinese and Japanese cultures and explores the production and application of Ming silks that imitated Japanese textiles. This group of silks is seen as the early examples of the transmission of Japanese motifs, which had limited influences on China, making them a valuable record of the Sino-Japanese cultural exchange of ancient textile art. The paper suggests that further research and exploration of this topic is warranted.

---

**Keywords:** Japanese textile patterns, Ming silks, Tsujiga-hana dye, Suri-haku, Nui-haku, tie-dye, painting, embroidery, metallic foils, cultural exchange.

### **Introduction**

In 1957, a piece of silk damask fragment with patterns combined of Ming and late Medieval Japanese design styles was excavated from the Ming Dingling Mausoleum (明定陵), which was named as damask with scattered patterns on geometric ground (曲水地鹤蚌花蝶纹紬). It has not been fully analyzed by researchers focusing on Chinese art history, yet Japanese researchers noticed its similarities of patterns with the Dingling J64 fabric by analysing a ginran (brocade) kasaya preserved in Koan-ji in Tokyo.

Among the massive collections of silk textiles of the Ming dynasty, this paper classifies a small scale of unearthed and handed down silks with motifs of Japanese medieval to the early modern periods. Including 1) the Dingling J64 damask, 2) the Koan-ji ginran kasaya, 3) a double weave sutra cover stored in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (item No.1940-4-187); 4) a double weave sutra cover preserved in the Beijing Art Museum, 5) a two colored satin in the Beijing Art Museum, and 6) a piece of embroidery collected by the Quanzhou Maritime Silk Road Museum (item No. M2-I5039).

Based on comprehensive analysis of Chinese and Japanese silk textiles and historical documents, this paper holds that this group of unearthed and handed down silks (except Quanzhou M2-I5039, all of which are shown in Figure 1) as the products designed and produced in the Ming Dynasty. As the early examples of the transmission of Japanese motifs which had limited influences on China, these silks are seen as a valuable

record of the Sino-Japanese cultural exchanges of ancient textile art and the influence of Japanese textile art on Chinese silks.

The paper suggests that further research and exploration of this topic is warranted.



a. illustration of damask fragment   b. ginran kasaya   c. brown double weave silk  
d. red double weave silk   e. sappan-red two colored satin

Figure 1. Ming silks with Japan's medieval and early modern textile patterns

### 1. Perceptions of Japanese Textiles to the Ming People

As the transmissions of Japanese textiles into the Ming dynasty, including limited products of fabrics, costumes and also a few linings in ink cases and other implements, different influences had been caused as well as relatively common perceptions among the Ming people. The routes of these perceptions could be summed up as official and unofficial channels. In the official historical records of the Ming court, some traces of fabrics as diplomatic gifts were sent to the Ming emperor, which were written in the character “布” or nuno, which indicated that these fabrics were possibly not silk.

With the conflicts and wars between Japanese pirates, other military forces and east coastal areas in the Ming dynasty, as a side effect, unofficial and semi-official contacts rapidly increased, especially during the mid-late 16th century around the Korea War on the Ming side or the Bunroku-Keicho War reversely (文禄・慶長役). The most significant works among these unofficial and semi-official recordation, are *Nihon I-ken* (日本一鑒) and *Records of Japan* (日本考). In these two books, their authors described the weaving techniques, costumes of both genders and almost all the social classes, and the demand of silk flosses and silk fabrics in Japan at that time, which were witnessed by the authors themselves or by their translators. Comparing with the cultural relics and historical records, the accuracy of their descriptions stood at high level. Also, the knowledge about implements and customs in Japan became popular among Ming official scholars. For example, Li Xu (李翊) recorded that Japanese women wore nishiki with fan patterns, which could be verified by Japanese relics handed down from the same time. It is very important that it showed in the late 16th century, some Japanese textile designs had been perceived by the Ming people, and the fan pattern was considered as a kind of Japanese style. It had been commonly understood that the Japanese folding fan (also known as kawahori-ogi, the fan in a bat's shape) was significantly different from Chinese moon-shaped, palm-leaf or feather fans, and became one of Japan's leading products for exportation along with swords since the Northern Song dynasty, as well as in the Ming dynasty.

As Japanese Medieval-Early Modern period approximately covers the same period of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the 16th century was a significant stage of Japanese textile art. Three main methods of

decorations had developed and matured, including Tsujiga-hana dye, Suri-haku and Nui-haku, which used complicated and delicate techniques to tie-dye, paint, and stick metallic foils as well as embroidery techniques. Meantime, Japan still demanded tremendous silk floss, twisted silk warps and fine but plain silk damasks as their reeling machines had not been imported from the late Ming dynasty yet, and their local manufacture of silk damasks were not well developed then, according to various researches of the Japanese weaving technique history. Also, we can witness many broken silk warps on Japan's local tabby silks named as Neri-nugi (練緯), which indicated that local silk warps were not strong and steady enough, especially comparing with those damasks imported from the Ming areas. Multiple evidences show that Japan still heavily relied on imported silk from China to meet the demand for their textile production, particularly for high-quality silk damasks. In this way, as mentioned above, this group of silks composed of 6 pieces with Japan's Medieval-Early Modern motifs could be considered to be produced in the Ming areas.

## 2. Japanese Medieval-Early Modern Motifs on Ming Silks

This group of silks composed of 6 pieces woven or embroidered with Japanese Medieval-Early Modern period motifs mainly include the themes of 1) animals, 2) implements or auspicious patterns. The Japanese motifs adopted by Ming silks mainly include “Mitsu-mori” and “Kaitsukushi” patterns, which means “triple-repeated” and “countless shells” motifs. And accordingly, the late Ming newly designed patterns influenced by Japan are mainly folding fans.

### 3.1 Animal Motifs

Including triple-repeated crane roundels, shells and conch shell patterns.

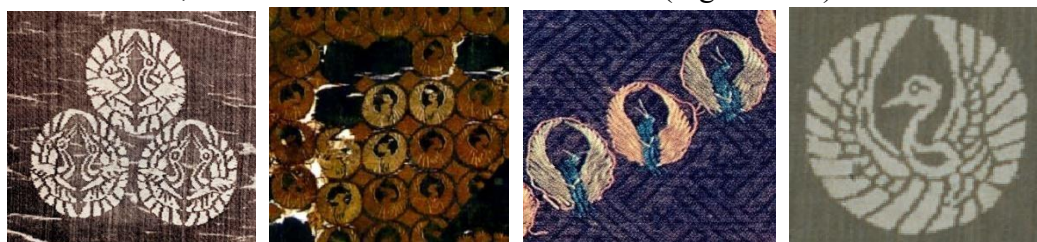
#### 3.1.1 Triple-repeated Crane Roundels

The crane image is neat in shape and highly simplified in figure, with raised wings, short tail feathers, curved neck and the omission of feet. There are two types of arrangement the roundels, including inward and outward crane heads (Figure 2). Comparing with other crane patterns on Ming silks, the triple-repeated crane roundels on the Dingling No.J64 fragment are highly patternized and rarely used on Ming silks, and the composition of a unit of three repeated elements is also seldom witnessed on other patterns of the Ming dynasty.



Figure 2. Triple-repeated cranes patterns on Ming silks

The earliest Japanese triple-repeated crane roundels by far was the textiles tailored as a kouchiki coat donated by Kameyama Joko (1249-1305) to the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu Shrine (鶴岡八幡宮), with the motif of crane necks stretched upward and omitted the depiction of feet, and was composed of triple-repeated roundels (Figure 3a). Around the 16th and 17th centuries, a highly patternized crane motif known as “Tsuru-maru” became popular in Japan. This kind of Tsuru-maru motif could be found on an embroidered kosode fragment made in 1603, a kosode screen and a Noh costume (Figure 3b-d)



a. kouchiki b. embroidery kosode fragment c. kosode screen d. Noh costume

Figure 3. Crane roundels on Japan's medieval to early modern textiles



Triple-repeated crane roundels, as well as the triple-repeated kikko to be described in part 3.2.1, belongs to the “Mitsu-mori” designs which have been popular in Japan since the late Heian to Medieval periods. The earliest triple-repeated motif designed in Japan was Mitsu-domoe (三つ巴), and as influenced by Mitsu-domoe and the shape of Cintā-maṇi, “Mitsu-mori” designs bloomed during the late Muromachi period and commonly used as kamon (family crest) and depicted on Noh costumes, as well as other embroidered, dyed or woven textiles (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Japan’s triple repeated patterns on late Muromachi textiles

As discussed and showed above, the single crane elements of the triple-repeated crane roundels on Ming silks were mainly derived from the “Tsuru-maru” pattern popular in Japanese Medieval-Early Modern periods. Ming artisans transformed and refined this pattern to depict the cranes more concisely. The composition of this kind of crane roundels intentionally imitated the “Mitsu-mori” patterns commonly spread in late Muromachi period, creating a sense of exoticism.

### 3.1.2 Shell Patterns

The shell patterns found on this group of silk textiles from the Ming dynasty were rarely found on other Ming textiles. They were characterized by vertical lines that divided the various areas of the clams, with horizontal lines depicting the growth-bands. Figure 5 shows examples of this pattern.



Figure 5. Shell patterns on Ming silks

This type of shell patterns was popular among textile designs in Japan during the 16th and 17th centuries, as shown in Figure 6. Since the Heian period, Japanese motif designs have included a rich diversity of marine imagery related to watersides and coasts, including waterfront scenes called Araiso (荒磯), Kaifu (海賦), Suhama (州浜) and fishing nets known as Aboshi (網干). An anonymous “Portrait of a Lady” collected in the Museum Yamato Bunkakan shows a woman wearing a typical kosode of the 16th century, and its design includes a shell motif highly similar to that in Figure 5.

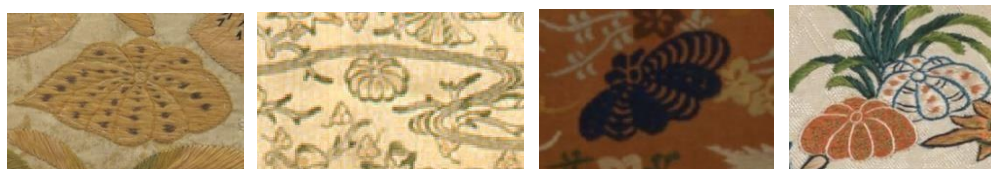


Figure 6. Shell patterns on Japan’s medieval to early modern textiles

This type of shell motif, together with the conch shell pattern to be discussed in following 3.1.3, refers to a wide variety of shell motifs called “Kaitsukushi-mon” (貝尽し文). The shells shown in Figs. 5 and 6 could

have been called “koukai” (甲介) in 17th century in Japan, according to a shell species category *Kaizukushi-ura no nishiki* (貝尽浦の錦) by Oeda Ryuuhou.

### 3.1.3 Conch Shell Patterns

Depicting a slender, upwardly curving conch shell that curls inwards to its centre with a serrated edge, sometimes with seagrass attached to the shell, or another type of conch shell similar to a Shankha of the Ming Dynasty decorative arts (Figure 7).

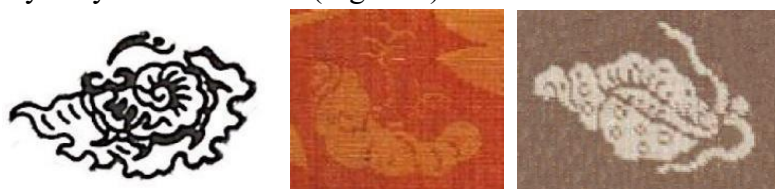


Figure 7. Conch shell patterns on Ming silks

The contemporaneously Japanese popular designs of “Kaitsukushi-mon” consists of conch shell motifs of serrated edges or slender shapes (Figure 8), which are often surrounded by simplified seagrass images. According to the depictions of *Kaizukushi-ura no nishikin*, those conch shells with serrated edges could be defined as “hanagatamikai” (花筐介), “kemokai” (クモ介) or “katabukai” (片部介), and the slender conch motif is similar to that of “yamatorikai” (山鳥介).

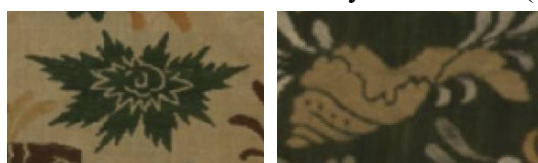


Figure 8. Conch shell patterns on Japan's early modern textiles

Most of conch shell motifs found on Ming silks derive from the Shankha of Buddhist Eight Jewels, which are often surrounded by ribbons or combined with other Buddhist auspicious motifs. It is likely that the separated patterns of shells and conchs depicted on Ming Dingling No.J64 damask were extracted from the Japanese “Kaitsukushi-mon” textiles and re-arranged, as a kind of imitation, absorption and adoption of foreign motifs. However, such shell and conch patterns were not depicted on silks after the late Ming period, and it was likely that their application and popularity were limited to a small scale and did not influence textile designs later in the Qing dynasty.

## 3.2 Implements or Auspicious Motifs

The implements or auspicious motifs include hexagon motifs, spread and folding fan patterns.

### 3.2.1 Hexagon Motifs

Hexagon motifs, also known as tortoiseshell motifs, including single hexagonal tortoiseshell pattern and triple-repeated hexagonal tortoiseshells, can be found on the silks from the late Ming dynasty (Figure 9). Small rosettes, “bishamon-kikkou”, and “mitsu-bishi” could be filled in hexagons and the Dingling No.J64 fragment represented the most complex design among this group of silks. Interestingly, the “Wako-zukan” collection from the Jiajing period of the Ming Dynasty, which depicts a rich variety of hexagon motifs on the clothes of “wako” and other Japanese figures, including the three types of hexagonal tortoiseshells mentioned above with careful and defined brushstrokes. This suggests that hexagon motifs were popular textile designs among some Ming people.

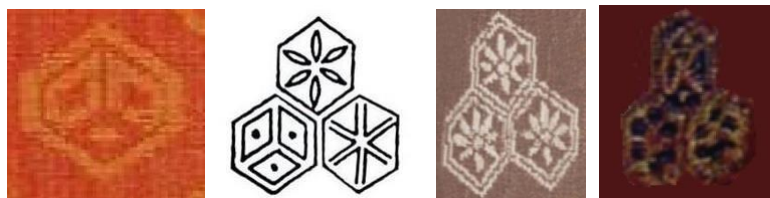


Figure 9. Hexagon patterns on Ming silks

The triple-repeated tortoiseshell patterns were common in Japan from the Kamakura to the Edo periods and were popular in the Japanese early modern period, when they were often applied as family crests. For example, Asai Nagamasa's portrait depicted a triple-repeated hexagon motifs as his family crest on his surcoat, and triple-repeated hexagon motifs were often embroidered, or woven on karaori textiles, and their hexagonal frames were often filled with small four-petal flowers (Figure10).



Figure 10. Japan's triple-repeated tortoiseshell patterns in early modern period

The triple-repeated tortoiseshell motifs were composed with the other three auspicious treasures in the late Ming to early Qing dynasties, such as the ink pen and ingot (筆錠), the chime stone (磬) and the Ruyi (如意), to form the "surely celebrating auspiciousness" pattern. While these motifs were basically surrounded by fluttering ribbons as well as other Chinese domestic auspicious treasures, which could be considered as an example of the limited influence of Japanese Medieval textile motifs on Ming and Qing silks.

### 3.2.2 Folding Fan Motifs

The folding fan motifs, including the combination of two folding fans and a single spread folding fan, were depicted in a very refined way on the late Ming silks (Figure 11). The woven "painted coverings" of the fans showed bamboo, flowers, and rocks, and their frames were carefully depicted with broad edges and slender sticks. These frames were known as the "monk head's" type, as their handle ends were basically round.

During the mid-to-late Ming period, folding fans became well known to the scholar-officials community and some were buried in their tombs. For example, 23 folding fans were unearthed from the tomb of Zhu Shoucheng discovered in Baoshan District, Shanghai; a list of burial artifacts written in the 21st year of the Wanli period (1593) showed a "golden fan" was buried in a tomb of the royal family of Luochuan of the Yi Clan. Current research suggests that these golden folding fans excavated from Ming tombs were all produced inner the Ming areas, showing relative exquisite craftsmanship and wide-spread popularity.



Figure 11. Folding fan patterns on Ming silks

Folding fan motifs were also popular among Japanese textile designs of the similar period, but the frames of their fans differed markedly from those of the Ming dynasty. The Japanese fans featured straight sticks with square or oval handles, and there was little variation in thickness between the edge and center sticks, as shown in Figure 12.



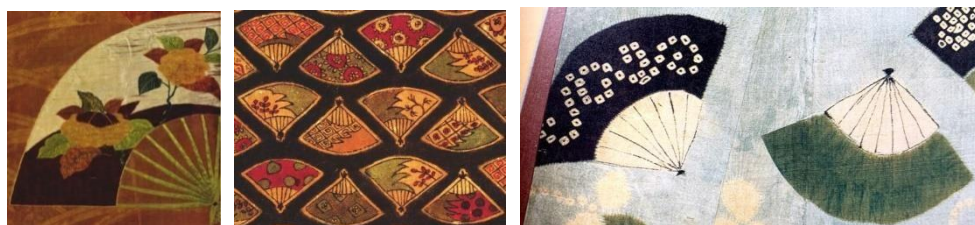


Figure 12. Folding fan patterns on Japan's medieval to early modern textiles

As mentioned above, a late Ming scholar official Li Xu, who was deceased in the 21st year of the Wanli reign (1593), once mentioned Japanese women wore nishiki with folding fan patterns as their clothes, which suggested the perceptions of Ming people of the exoticism of folding fan pattern and its popularity in Japan. Late Ming manuscripts, including the *Treatise on Superfluous Things* (長物志), also praised the imported Japanese furnishings such as the tables, incense and ink stone cases and fans. The localized production and popularity of folding fans in the Ming dynasty, coupled with the Ming people's familiarity with their initial exoticism and perception of the folding fan motifs on Japanese textiles, all contributed to the eventual status of this kind of motifs as a textile design influenced by foreign culture during the Ming dynasty.

Through the analysis of meibutsu-gire fabrics collected in Japan, single but spread folding fan motifs were discovered, including the satin stored at the Kyoto National Museum (item No. I 甲 195) and the "Souamidonsu" at the Tokyo National Museum (item No. TI-17). Both fabrics featured folding fan motifs surrounded by ribbons and combined with other auspicious symbols, indicating that the folding fan motif had become part of the design system for auspicious patterns during the late Ming dynasty.

### 3. Discussion

The most significant sample of this group of silks is the No.J64 silk damask fragment, which was excavated from the Dingling mausoleum. Although the fragment is not well preserved, the illustration is clear. It was used as the primary fabric of a coat belonging to Empress Xiaojing, who was deceased in 1611 and was firstly buried in the following year. Her grave was later relocated to Dingling after her son became the next emperor of the Ming Empire in 1620. However, her coffin was not opened during the move, and the J64 fragment was found inside her coffin, indicating that its manufacture could be dated to no later than 1612.

To those familiar with typical Ming silk designs, it is clear that the Dingling No.J64 fragment contains several elements that are unusual and alien to typical Ming styles. Including the triple-repeated hexagons and the cranes in roundels, and additionally, it is very uncommon for Ming silks to feature shells, or conch shells without Buddhism significance, or seagrass, since the depictions of sea scenery with such details are rare in the Ming dynasty.

Although they were rare in Ming dynasty silk, highly stylized images of cranes like those found on the Dingling No.J64 fragment had been used by Japanese textile designs since at least the 14th century and were common in the late 16th to 17th centuries, as evidenced by relative cultural relics. The compositions of triple-repeated kikko is a stylized design in Japan, it firstly appeared on silk was in Heian period, and was popular from Kamakura to the Edo period for very long time. Also, the composition of three repeated images no matter in a roundel or not, has been used as "Mitsu-domoe" since the Kamakura period, and saw tremendous variety during the late Medieval to early Modern period in Japan as following illustrations. Actually, the composition of three repeated images is defined as "Mitsu" or "Mitsu-mori" of a certain kind of motif among Japanese pattern design system. Also, the detailed depiction of coastal scenery, including coastlines, beaches, sea grass, and shells, was called "Suhamu" (州浜) in Japanese designs, and the collection of shell and sea snail images was called "Kaitsukushi" (貝尽くし). These design elements were rare in Ming dynasty silks but were very

common in Japanese textiles of the same period, demonstrating a preference for ocean-inspired motifs in Japanese design.

The folding fan pattern on the Dingling No.J64 fragment depicted the Ming folding fan's structure, but the selection of the folding fan pattern could have been intended to meet the imagination of Japan, as it was commonly understood that folding fans were first imported from Japan and had been famous imported luxury products for a long time from the Song to Ming dynasties. The traditional palm-leaf and feather fans were always surrounded by ribbons and served as multiple auspicious symbols in textile designs, while the folding fan pattern was a typical Japanese image.

As Ming people perceive diversely impressions on various Japanese implements, techniques, costumes and customs by official and unofficial channels, Japanese textiles and related designs were introduced into the Ming dynasty in a limited scale, which lead to the relative influences of transmission and perception.

Since the textile design compositions of scattered patterns, especially with auspicious symbols, and the scheme of flower-scroll, are very suitable to incorporate new patterns among the routine ones, including those inspired by Japanese designs. And the mixture of Chinese and Japanese designs won't seem to be out of tune since in most cases, The addition of smaller Japanese patterns to the larger, more dominant Chinese patterns allowed for a harmonious blend of styles, creating an exotic atmosphere that was likely intentional. The capability and convenience to redesign allowed the imitation of Japanese motifs on Ming silks.

To consider about the possible purposes of production, these new designs with Japanese patterns on silks might meet the need of imperial demand and likely to be the by-product of diplomatic gifts as their manufacture was high likely to be linked with the Korea War during the late Ming dynasty (1592-1598), especially after the victory of Ming and Korean troops in Pyongyang in 1593. They also could be ordered to show the Emperor Wanli's merit and to share with his court. The fact that the silk was tailored as a female coat used by an imperial concubine who was conferred a title of Empress Xiaojing after life may suggest that it was a high-status item intended for imperial use.

#### 4. Conclusion

1. This group of silks could reveal the traces of the early transmissions of Japanese textile designs in the late Ming Dynasty;
2. The textile design of scattered patterns (on geometric ground or not) with combined styles of Chinese and Japanese was likely to be related with the Ming imperial court;
3. The popularity of this kind of designs was quite limited according to complex reasons, and only the folding fan and triple-repeated hexagon motifs could be witnessed on silks of the late Ming to early Qing dynasty.

#### References

Fan, J. (2012). Changes of the commodity composition of the Sino-Japanese trade from the 16th to the early 19th centuries- a study based on raw-silk and silk. *Historiography Research in Anhui*, (1), 5-14.

Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Museum of Dinglin, Archaeological Team of the City of Beijing. (1990). *Dingling: Volume 1*. Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House.

Kirikata, K. (1994). *Meibutsugire*. Kyoto: Kyoto Shoin.

Kyoto National Museum. (1999). *Kyoto Style-Trends in 16th-19th Century Kimono*. Kyoto: Kyoto National Museum.



- Li, X. (1982). *Jie'an Lao Ren Man Bi*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- National Museum of Japanese History. (1994). *A Kaleidoscope of Japanese Early Modern Kimono- An Exhibition of Kosode Byobu*. Tokyo: The Asahi Shimbun Company.
- National Museum of Japanese History. (2008). *A Portrait of Dyeing and Weaving: Textiles Preserved in Japan and Korea*. Sakura: National Museum of Japanese History.
- Nishimura, H. (1967). *Orimono//Nihon no Bijutsu (No.12)*. Tokyo: Shibundo.
- Ogasawara, S. (2018). *Study on Meibutsugire: Based on the Shifuku Tokibukuro from Konoike Family's Collection*. Tokyo: Kokushokankokai.
- Su, M. (2019). *Study on the Chinese Silk Used by the Military Colours of Peter the Great*. Shanghai: Donghua University.
- Suda, M., & Peng, H. (2011). Reconsideration of the Wako-zukan. *Journal of National Museum of China*, (2), 34-46.
- Takaki, K. (2013). *Study on Patterns and Dyeing Techniques of Kosode in the Early Edo Period: Focusing on Early Yuzen Dyeing*. Osaka: Kwansei Gakuin University.
- Wu, X. (2019). The golden fans: Ming tombs and Sino-Japanese communications. *Literature and Art Studies*, (12), 135-146.
- Yang, L. (2011). *Research on Ming Dynasty Buddhist Canon Silk Covers in the Beijing Art Museum*. Beijing: Xueyuan Publishing House.
- Zhao, F. (2019). *A World of Silks: Collection of Global Silk Art*. Shanghai: Donghua University Press.