

# A Study on Design Innovation Methods for Song Dynasty Patterns in Contemporary Contexts

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## Abstract:

The Song Dynasty marks a pinnacle in traditional Chinese aesthetics, with its patterns embodying profound historical and cultural significance. In contemporary design, the innovative application of Song Dynasty patterns has emerged as a key research focus for expressing Chinese style. This paper examines the theoretical and practical challenges of design innovation involving Song Dynasty patterns in the context of the information age. By exploring their historical origins, cultural connotations, and aesthetic characteristics, the study highlights their defining feature: harmony and *youya* (优雅, elegance). Through the integration of digital technologies, this research conducts various design innovation experiments to explore effective methods for adapting Song Dynasty patterns to modern contexts. The findings provide valuable theoretical references for incorporating traditional Chinese patterns into art education and contemporary design practices.

## Keywords:

Song Dynasty patterns  
Chinese traditional culture  
Contemporary context  
Digitalization  
Design innovation methods

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## 1. Introduction

Chinese traditional patterns boast a long history, reflecting a rich cultural heritage and a distinctive artistic style. Aesthetically, they are renowned for their *youya* (优雅, elegance), characterized by a harmonious balance among color, pattern, material, and structure. This refined sense of harmony and beauty reached its zenith during the Song Dynasty. Rather than pursuing overly vibrant or intricate designs, Song Dynasty patterns emphasize a finely tuned elegance (*youya*). As a cultural treasure of China, these

patterns encapsulate significant historical narratives, cultural symbolism, and aesthetic philosophies.

## 2. Current research on Song Dynasty patterns

The Song Dynasty represents a pinnacle in Chinese aesthetics, inheriting the roots of Chinese civilization that had evolved over thousands of years and showcasing remarkable creativity. During this period, the textile industry flourished,

characterized by exquisite craftsmanship and a pursuit of *youya* ( 优雅 ). Fields such as weaving, dyeing, ceramics, and painting were regarded as aesthetic paradigms, leaving a profound impact on subsequent generations. The concept of *youya* ( 优雅 ) can be traced back to the Zhou Dynasty. In the early Chinese anthology of poetry, *Shijing*, it is stated: “To speak of the affairs of the world is called ‘*ya*’ ( 雅 ).” Here, the term “*ya*” denotes the propriety and normativity of things<sup>[1]</sup>. Additionally, the term *youya* ( 优雅 ) encompasses meanings of richness and fullness, as “*you*” ( 优 ) refers to abundance and fertility. In the *Zhouli* commentary, it is stated: “*Ya* is correctness; what is considered correct today serves as a model for future generations,” thus positioning “*ya*” ( 雅 ) as a paradigm for emulation<sup>[2]</sup>. The introduction of the concept of *ya zheng* ( 雅正 ) elevated “*ya*” to a guiding principle in the philosophy of creation. According to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition)*, *youya* ( 优雅 ) is defined as “graceful elegance” or “beautiful and refined”<sup>[3]</sup>. This definition reflects the aesthetic qualities associated with the term, highlighting its emphasis on beauty and sophistication. In the *Aesthetic Dictionary*, *youya* ( 优雅 ) is described as a synthesis of “beauty” and “elegance,” reflecting an aesthetic state characterized by gracefulness, femininity, refinement, gentleness, and cultured demeanor<sup>[4]</sup>.

The Song Dynasty was indeed an era of *youya*, setting aesthetic benchmarks for literature, art, and social life. Its cultural achievements are widely recognized in academic circles. The renowned Chinese scholar Mr. Shang Gang once remarked in *A New Compilation of the History of Chinese Arts and Crafts* that “the epitome of elegance and beauty is precisely the Song Dynasty”<sup>[5]</sup>. As an important expression of traditional Chinese culture, Song Dynasty patterns have garnered increasing attention in contemporary design due to their high aesthetic achievements and rich cultural connotations. The protection, inheritance, and innovation of these patterns constitute significant topics in cultural research, injecting new inspiration and vitality into the design industry.

In summary, the legacy of the Song Dynasty continues to influence modern aesthetics and design practices, underscoring the importance of preserving and promoting this rich cultural heritage.

In recent years, research on design innovation methods for Song Dynasty patterns has made significant progress, although there is still room for further

development. Current academic studies on these patterns primarily focus on their historical background, cultural symbols, and aesthetic characteristics (**Figure 1**). Scholars have analyzed the design language of Song Dynasty patterns from the perspectives of art history and cultural history, exploring their refined *youya* ( 优雅 ) style, the use of natural elements, and the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. This body of research has provided important theoretical guidance for contemporary design and has been applied in fields such as fashion design, packaging design, interior decoration, and bookbinding.

In practice, the translation and contemporary application of Song Dynasty patterns have developed into established models. Designers typically employ methods such as direct replication, deconstruction and recombination, and fusion innovation to incorporate Song Dynasty patterns into modern creations. These approaches aim to transform traditional aesthetics into innovative products that meet modern consumer demands while also yielding notable economic benefits.

Thus, while significant strides have been made in applying Song Dynasty patterns to modern design, further exploration and innovation in this field remain essential.



**Figure 1.** Research themes and keywords of “Song Dynasty Patterns” in CNKI over the past decade

Research on design innovation methods for Song Dynasty patterns in contemporary contexts continues to face significant shortcomings and challenges. On one hand, the lack of systematic studies on Song Dynasty patterns restricts designers’ ability to fully comprehend their overall style and deeper meanings during the

innovation process. Consequently, design innovations often lack coherence and depth. On the other hand, in practical applications, some designers place excessive emphasis on formal novelty and reconstruction. They frequently deconstruct and recombine elements of Song Dynasty patterns or mimic their superficial characteristics without truly appreciating the cultural essence and aesthetic subtleties embedded within these patterns. This superficial approach, which neglects an in-depth interpretation of the core cultural values of Song Dynasty patterns, results in designs that prioritize form over substance. While such designs may appear novel in the short term, they fail to establish lasting emotional resonance.

Moreover, contemporary designers face the critical challenge of balancing innovation, commercialization, and the preservation of cultural essence. Striking this balance is essential to ensure that the rich cultural and aesthetic heritage of the Song Dynasty is not only safeguarded but also seamlessly integrated into modern design practices.

### 3. Cultural connotations and the *youya* style of Song Dynasty patterns

Song Dynasty patterns represent a vital component of traditional Chinese culture, distinguished by their unique artistic style and profound cultural connotations. These patterns hold significant reference value for the reproduction and development of contemporary culture. The Song Dynasty, often regarded as a pinnacle of Chinese cultural refinement, is synonymous with the *youya* ( 优雅 ) style, which embodies elegance and sophistication. To analyze the narrative techniques employed in Song Dynasty patterns, the authors conducted extensive research, including a review of relevant literature, images, and physical artifacts. Field investigations and comparative studies further enabled the identification and synthesis of the overall characteristics of these patterns, which were found to exemplify a finely balanced aesthetic that encapsulates the essence of *youya*.

Song Dynasty patterns are rich in cultural symbolism and artistic significance. They are generally categorized into two main types: floral patterns and geometric patterns (**Figure 2**). Floral patterns commonly feature

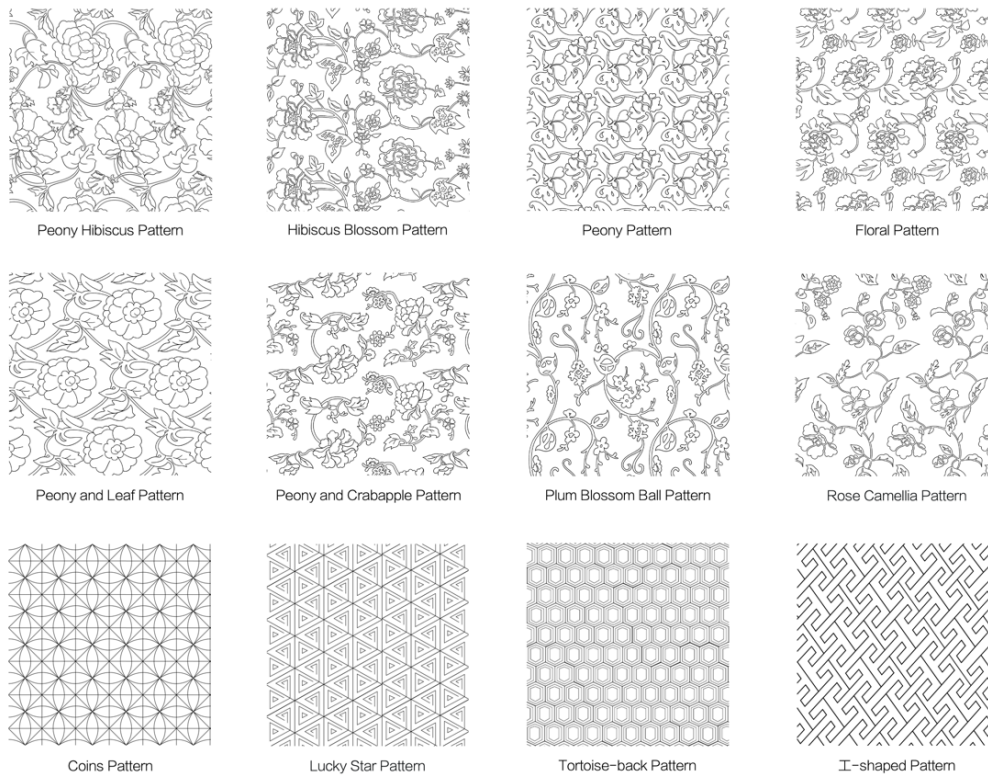
elegant representations of flowers such as plums, orchids, bamboo, and chrysanthemum, which symbolize the noble and *youya* ( 优雅 ) character of a gentleman. Bird motifs, including magpies, peacocks, and mandarin ducks, convey auspicious meanings associated with good fortune and loyalty. These patterns are often centered on natural elements, emphasizing a vivid and lifelike realistic style.

In contrast, geometric patterns are characterized by their simplicity and symmetry, reflecting an appreciation for the beauty of lines and their emotional resonance within Chinese culture. Common geometric motifs include linked coin patterns, diamond shapes, and the “Ba Da Yun” ( 八达晕 , Eightfold Radiance) pattern. These patterns, transitioning from realism to abstraction, symbolize prosperity, inclusivity, infinity, and vastness. Their balanced and symmetrical structures evoke a rhythmic sense of *youya* ( 优雅 ). For example, the symmetrical structure of the “Ba Da Yun” pattern symbolizes expansion from a central point outward, representing connectivity and the smooth flow of energy in all directions.

Whether floral or geometric, all Song Dynasty patterns share an uplifting spiritual orientation, with *youya* ( 优雅 ) serving as their central value. This concept is closely linked to the idea of “Zheng” ( 正 ), or uprightness, embodying the traditional cultural pursuit of positive and beautiful ideals. The *youya* aesthetic is reflected not only in the motifs selected but also in the meticulous craftsmanship and design processes, culminating in patterns of exceptional elegance and artistic refinement.

In the ancient dictionary *Yu Pian*, *youya* ( 优雅 ) is defined as simplicity. For instance, the phrase “淡妆素抹旧罗衣，雅致天姿覲竺归” (“A simple adornment with faded silk, graceful and elegant, presenting celestial beauty as it returns to the monk’s abode”) illustrates how ancient scholars associated simplicity with *youya*. The aesthetic pursuit of “valuing simplicity” inspired a restrained approach to design, often characterized by monochromatic or analogous color schemes. The patterns emphasized a balanced relationship between rigidity and flexibility, while their intricate, lifelike details ensured exceptional craftsmanship.

In terms of artistic expression, these exquisite patterns harmonized seamlessly with the delicate,



**Figure 2.** Typical Song Dynasty patterns (floral and geometric themes)

breathable qualities of silk fabrics, embodying the essence of *youya*. The weaving and embroidery techniques of the Song Dynasty were both sophisticated and diverse, encompassing embroidery, painting, *kesi* ( 缙丝 , a form of silk tapestry), and jacquard weaving. Ming Dynasty scholar Dong Qichang praised Song Dynasty embroidery, stating, “The embroidery of the Song people was fine and detailed, with threads as thin as a hair, and the colors were exquisitely delicate, radiating brilliance...” [6]. Such craftsmanship brought vitality and vividness to the patterns.

Artifacts from the tomb of Huang Sheng of the Southern Song Dynasty, for example, reveal garments made of jacquard-patterned textiles with painted borders. These pieces reflect a remarkable level of artistry, as the fine patterns integrated harmoniously with the silk fabric structure. The close relationship between *youya* patterns and silk fabrics lies in their mutual refinement—coarse or poorly crafted patterns appear clumsy, disrupting the harmony when paired with silk. The intricate craftsmanship of Song Dynasty patterns, combined with the light, breathable qualities of silk, created a perfect union.

This fusion not only represented aesthetic appeal but also conveyed profound cultural significance, reflecting a positive attitude and an aspiration for an enriched life. *Youya* patterns symbolized the noble character of a gentleman, expressing a love for beauty and mindfulness. In form, they achieved a perfect balance between strength and softness, while their meticulous craftsmanship ensured outstanding quality. Together, these elements encapsulated the unique and captivating *youya* ( 优雅 ) temperament of Song Dynasty patterns.

#### 4. Digital empowerment in the design innovation of Song Dynasty patterns

The Song Dynasty represents a pivotal era in the inheritance and evolution of Chinese culture, during which a profound unity between ideology and social existence was achieved. Rooted in the *youya* ( 优雅 ) cultural essence, Song Dynasty patterns seamlessly integrated material form with spiritual depth, embedding cultural connotations into various aspects of social life, production, dissemination, and consumption. This interconnectedness between cultural transmission



and material production facilitated the effective transformation of ideas into tangible forms, creating a closed loop in cultural production. The Song Dynasty not only established the *youya* aesthetic as a cultural benchmark but also developed a systematic mechanism for cultural production. A comprehensive understanding of its principles, pathways, and methods offers valuable insights for the reinterpretation and innovative design of cultural elements in contemporary China. The *Liji: Daxue* states, “If there is daily renewal, daily renewal, and further renewal”<sup>[7]</sup>. Innovation demands the courage to explore new ideas, methods, and forms continually. It also necessitates the development of new modes, carriers, and forms of cultural construction, promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of cultural resources through advanced science and technology, with creativity and innovation as its core<sup>[8]</sup>.

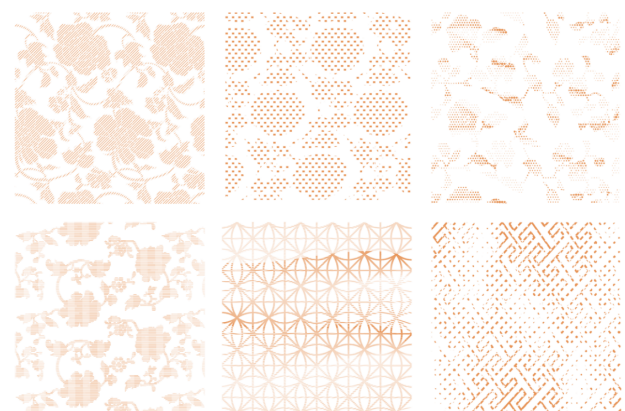
In the late 20th century, humanity transitioned into the information age, where globalization, digitalization, and virtual interaction began to reshape cultural narratives profoundly. As Altai Toffler noted in *The Third Wave*, the information age represents a third wave following agricultural and industrial civilizations—a transformative new era<sup>[9]</sup>. The rapid progress of digitization has ushered the information age into an advanced phase, characterized by widespread internet use, intensified globalization, and the emergence of virtual reality (VR) interaction. These developments have significantly altered cultural expressions and communication modes<sup>[10]</sup>. Digitalization has redefined human cognition, opening up new possibilities for adapting traditional patterns in contemporary contexts. This shift highlights the need to harness information technology effectively to construct communicative discourses, presenting unprecedented opportunities for the design innovation of Song Dynasty patterns.

Modern design concepts and digital technologies offer innovative approaches to integrating Song Dynasty patterns with contemporary contexts. Techniques such as scanning, computer-aided design (CAD), and parametric design enable the digital collection and reconstruction of these traditional patterns, preserving their intricate details while allowing flexible modifications. Additionally, VR and augmented reality (AR) technologies can incorporate Song Dynasty patterns into virtual environments, creating novel visual effects.

Innovations in materials and craftsmanship further revitalize Song Dynasty patterns. The application of environmentally friendly materials and digital manufacturing techniques—such as 3D printing and laser engraving—has become widespread in modern design. Moreover, cross-disciplinary approaches and integrations with other art forms or cultural symbols, such as clothing, ceramics, and furniture design, enhance the cultural and aesthetic value of these products, embedding the *youya* aesthetics of the Song Dynasty into everyday life.

In response to the characteristics of the current era, the author explores the use of digital technology to redesign representative Song Dynasty patterns (**Figure 3**). The selected patterns include peony and hibiscus, peony and leaf, rose camellia, peony and crabapple, linked coin, and the “Gong” ( 工 ) character patterns. Song Dynasty clothing patterns prioritize symmetry between content and form. Thus, the redesign process focuses on preserving the integrity of the original patterns while adopting innovative design languages.

The design process begins by preserving the complete outlines of traditional patterns and converting them into line-drawing vector images using computer software. Next, the color palette is simplified to a monochromatic scheme, with a thematic color tone selected to support the application of analogous colors. Finally, artificial intelligence is used to generate the internal structures of the patterns, reconstructing them through points, lines, and surfaces. This approach presents Song Dynasty patterns in a reimagined form, reflecting a contemporary interpretation while honoring their traditional essence.



**Figure 3.** Experimental innovation in Song Dynasty pattern design

## 5. Conclusion

Emphasizing the centrality of Chinese national culture and deeply exploring the inherent principles of its inheritance and development is a vital mission for advancing the value innovation of outstanding traditional culture. In the process of design innovation for Song Dynasty patterns, it is crucial to preserve the *youya* ( 优雅 ) aesthetic character, ensuring that the cultural essence is carried forward while continuously creating new value. Cultural dissemination must incorporate distinct cultural symbols, as the creation of a *youya* image not only underpins the revival of cultural consciousness but also represents an essential pathway for enhancing the international influence of Chinese civilization.

In the context of the information age, digital technology is driving the innovative development of Chinese national culture across multiple dimensions of production and dissemination. This integration not only supports the global inheritance and promotion of Chinese culture but also breathes modern perspectives and vitality into traditional cultural expressions. By effectively linking Song Dynasty patterns with the cultural industry, the focus can shift from simple formal production to cultural reproduction through industrial innovation. This fusion of culture and industry has the potential to enhance industrial efficiency while fostering the healthy, sustainable, and high-quality development of China's rich traditional heritage.

### Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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