



## The Cultural Review of Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Lacquerware Development: Analysing the Evolution of Yangzhou Lacquerware, Peranakan Lacquerware and Arts from Japan and Korea

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**ABSTRACT:** The preservation and development of modern mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware are crucial for maintaining a historic craft that reflects both technical mastery and cultural legacy. This research traces the evolution of mother-of-pearl lacquerware from traditional methods to modern adaptations, highlighting differences in cultural influences across three regions and the sustainability issues they create. It includes field visits to the Yangzhou Lacquerware Factory in China and the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum in Malaysia, as well as a thorough review of relevant literature on Southeast Asian craft centres. Combining fieldwork, visual analysis and literature insights, the study offers a comprehensive view of how traditional craftsmanship relates to modern practices focusing on material treatment, techniques, design and cultural meanings. It examines techniques, materials, motifs and the cultural forces shaping current mother-of-pearl inlay practices. The results showcase the detailed craftsmanship of pointed-shell inlay in Yangzhou, the blend of Chinese and Malaysian aesthetics in Peranakan lacquerware and innovative uses of mother-of-pearl in modern Japanese and Korean art. These regional studies demonstrate both persistence and change in traditional inlay methods. The research identifies key sustainability challenges, including a decline in skilled artisans, high costs and changing market needs. Despite these issues, ongoing efforts aim to merge traditional techniques with new materials and designs, securing the relevance of mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware today.

**KEYWORDS:** Mother-of-Pearl Inlay, Lacquerware, Cultural Heritage, Contemporary Craft, Cross-Cultural Influence

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### INTRODUCTION

The evolution of contemporary mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware is vital for preserving the technical and cultural heritage of this historically significant craft. Conventional techniques relied on highly specialised manual skills, which are increasingly endangered as the number of trained craftsmen declines. Without ongoing development, the knowledge embedded in the meticulous preparation of lacquer, the manipulation of shell materials and the long-established inlaying procedures face the risk of irreparable loss.

Contemporary advancements are also essential to ensure the craft remains relevant within modern cultural and economic frameworks. The introduction of new tools, materials and production settings has transformed the expectations of both artisans and audiences. To sustain the craft effectively, practitioners must strategically incorporate modern technologies without undermining the tradition's fundamental aesthetic and technical principles. Achieving this balance is crucial for preserving authenticity while fostering innovation.

Challenges arise not only from technological change but also from shifts in market demand and cultural perception. High production costs, labour intensity and lengthy fabrication processes limit commercial viability, while mass-produced decorative goods frequently overshadow handcrafted pieces. Addressing these constraints is necessary to establish sustainable pathways for training, production, and dissemination. Only by understanding these challenges can preservation strategies be effectively implemented to support the continued vitality of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware in the modern era.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

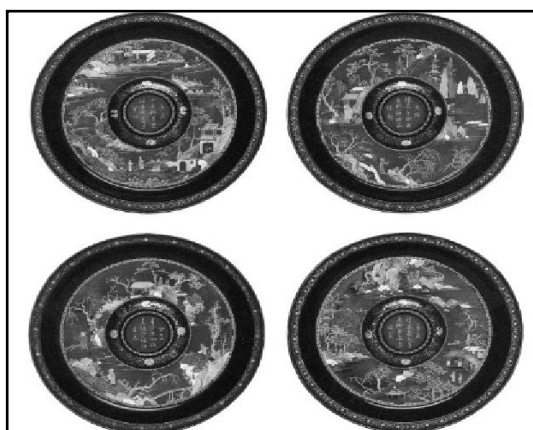
### Collections in the National Museums of Scotland and Denmark

Among the East Asian artefacts displayed in museums throughout Scotland, a prominent highlight is the Chroma-Watt bequest. The collection comprises three distinctive black lacquer inlaid mother-of-pearl artworks. This craft is known as "lac burgauté" in French or "螺钿" (*luòdiàn*) in Chinese. The pieces demonstrate the exquisite craftsmanship characteristic of Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) lacquerware. They include a pair of elegant plates and a bowl produced during the Jiaqing era (1796-1820). These lacquerware items not only exemplify the distinctive aesthetics of traditional Chinese craftsmanship but also reflect the societal culture of their time (Clunas, 2004).

During the Qing Dynasty, lacquerware decorated with *luòdiàn* (mother-of-pearl) inlay served as a significant status symbol among the imperial family and the aristocracy. It is a highly prized element within the tradition of Chinese craftsmanship. Among the artefacts, one notable example is an octagonal *luòdiàn* tea caddy inlaid with mother-of-pearl. It is elegantly displayed on a *Regency-style* ebonised wooden stand. This blend of Eastern craftsmanship and Western presentation emphasises the tea caddy's unique artistic value. The intricate work also exemplifies the cultural exchange between East and West in the field of decorative arts.

Renowned for its elegant design, *Regency-era* furniture offers an ideal setting for showcasing such Eastern treasures. Placing this Chinese lacquer object on Western-style furniture underscores its historical significance and cross-cultural resonance.

These esteemed *luòdiàn* lacquerware pieces are highly prized items within art collections. They additionally function as significant tangible resources for the study of Qing Dynasty craftsmanship. These artifacts document the exceptional skills of lacquerware artisans from the period, reflecting the cultural diversity of Qing society. Furthermore, these works provide insights into the aesthetic preferences and the important role those decorative arts played within that era (East Asian Collections in Scottish Museums).



**Figure 1: Early Qing Dynasty “Xian Ruo” Signed Saucer Stands Inlaid with Mother-of-Pearl Landscape Scenes and Poetry**

**Source: Collection of the National Museum of Denmark. Field research documented by the author, based on exhibition records and archival data, 2024.**

The National Museum of Denmark exhibits four lacquer tray stands from the early Qing Dynasty featuring *seashell inlay* and landscape motifs (Figure 1). Each stand has a diameter of 14.9 centimetres and a height of 1.5 centimetres. Crafted from black lacquer, they were designed to accommodate teacups and bowls. The artworks feature a raised central ring called the tray mouth, decorated with landscape motifs on the outer ring and inscriptions from classical Chinese poetry on the inner ring. A notable example depicts a gathering with friends, accompanied by a lute and includes a small bridge, flowing water, and a rustic dwelling. This composition reflects the lyrical aesthetics and poetic sensibility characteristic of scholar-gentlemen culture (Clunas, 1991).

Craftsmen employed a remarkably rich palette in the seashell inlay with each miniature figure. It is unknown whether the young boy is holding a lute or the elderly man leaning on a staff. Those images are composed of at least five distinct shell colours. At the centre, an inscribed poem reads: "*I heard that spring has not yet arrived, so I walked along the cold plum trees to inquire about the news*". This poetic verse harmoniously resonates with the imagery, delicately capturing the joy of seeking seasonal renewal through friendship.

The emotional depth within the landscape reflects more than simple visual beauty. It expresses the feelings of the literati tradition. In these colourful seashell inlay scenes, it is this refined scholarly spirit that viewers are invited to enjoy.

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The National Museum of Denmark also exhibits another early Qing Dynasty tray stand with Seashell inlay featuring a poem that reads: "*The courtyard is filled with the poetic atmosphere, and red leaves flutter in the wind covering the entire courtyard*". The viewer seems to step into a poetic realm. As one climbs the steps, the melodious sound of a *qin* (Chinese zither) appears to drift through the surroundings. The words only reveal themselves as the gentle murmur of hidden springs. This seamless fusion of poetry enhances the cultural resonance of the seashell-inlaid lacquerware. Therefore, it imbues each piece with layers of meaning beyond its decorative function.

### Visit to the Yangzhou, China Lacquerware Factory

During the research period, craftsmen at the Yangzhou lacquerware factory were observed demonstrating their superb craftsmanship with the high aesthetic quality of Yangzhou lacquerware's pointed-shell *inlay*. Recognised as an intangible cultural heritage, Yangzhou lacquerware holds significant cultural value. The observation is intended to explore the characteristics of the lacquerware's pointed-shell inlay by learning the techniques of craftsmen at work in the factory.

*Pointed shell* lacquerware from the Yangzhou factory in Jiangsu, China, is renowned for its distinctive craftsmanship that showcases the unique features of Yangzhou lacquerware traditions. The 'pointed shell' technique involves a specialised form of shell inlay. It demands extraordinary precision in material preparation. Craftsmen start by selecting high-quality shells, then carefully remove the internal layers of calcareous deposits. They keep only the pure inner nacre, which they then hand-polish to a thickness thinner than one-third of a human hair. They strictly avoid machine polishing or chemical erosion, as even slight mishandling can weaken the shell's integrity.

Using specialised tools, craftsmen carefully carve intricate patterns such as botanical motifs, birds, animals and celestial figures based on detailed design sketches. They apply coloured lacquer to the reverse side of each carved shell to create a variety of hues. The craftsmen sometimes incorporate gold leaf, silver leaf or threads of precious metal to enrich decorative details. The ultra-thin shell pieces combined with metallic elements are delicately 'dotted' onto the lacquer surface using lacquer as an adhesive, hence the term '*pointed shell*'.

Craftsmen use precise tools to position each shell fragment according to the design layout. After applying coloured lacquer, they allow the piece to dry thoroughly before polishing the surface. This final stage reveals the intricate design and the inlay's iridescent brilliance when illuminated. The outcomes highlight the technical mastery of the craft.

The tradition of Yangzhou *pointed shell* lacquerware began during the Yuan Dynasty and later thrived throughout the Ming and Qing periods. However, it sharply declined in the Late Qing Dynasty due to prolonged warfare. These hardships almost led the craft to extinction. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, renewed efforts to revive this heritage led to the establishment of the Yangzhou Lacquerware Factory (Zhang, 2009).

In 1975, skilled experts from the factory conducted systematic research on existing examples of Yangzhou pointed-shell lacquerware housed at the Palace Museum in Beijing. After three years of experimental restoration, they successfully revived the long-lost technique in 1978. Thus, they are restoring a craft that had been dormant for nearly two centuries. This revival marked the return of Yangzhou *pointed shell* craftsmanship to its former brilliance.

Among the factory's most renowned achievements is the creation of the Splendid Eternal Love pointed shell screen, which was presented in 1979 by Vice Chairwoman Deng Yingchao to Chairman Kim Il-sung of North Korea (Figure 2). It was a state gift that symbolises both diplomatic goodwill and the renewed vitality of traditional Chinese craftsmanship.

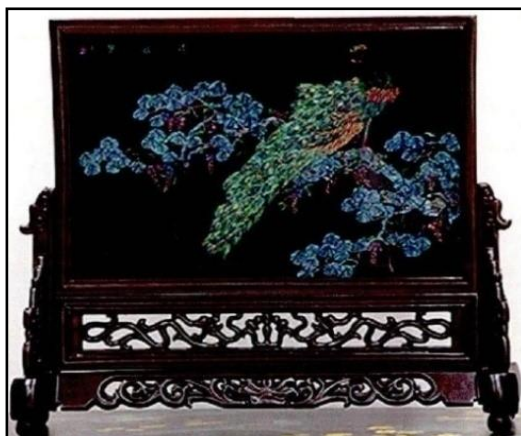


Figure 2: Splendid Eternal Spring (Jin Xiu Chang Chun): a Pointed Shell Inlaid Screen Produced by the Yangzhou Lacquerware Factory

Source: Yangzhou Lacquerware Factory archival record. Also cited in Yangzhou Intangible Heritage Report, 1979.

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The text from the Yangzhou Intangible Heritage Report (1979) discusses how traditional themes are prevalent in Yangzhou Dianluo lacquerware, including auspicious patterns, animals, flowers and plants. Currently, Luodian lacquerware is primarily appreciated as a decorative art form. It emphasises its aesthetic value rather than its practical functionality as a container. To bridge the gap between traditional craftsmanship and modern life, we need to explore ways to integrate traditional techniques into contemporary living. This could involve creating lacquerware designs that serve practical functions in people's daily lives, thus allowing Yangzhou Luodian lacquerware to evolve.

### Visit to Baba Nyonya Cultural Museum, Melaka, Malaysia

The *Peranakan* culture in Malaysia originated in the early 15th century when Malacca became an important trading centre on the Malay Peninsula. Many Chinese merchants arrived in Malacca during this period. They married local Malays, hence raising a new social group known as the *Peranakans*. Over time, the descendants of these *Peranakans* engaged in increasing cross-cultural exchanges with the local Malays leading to a unique cultural phenomenon known as *Peranakan* culture. The term "*Peranakan*" refers to individuals of mixed Chinese and Malay descent who play significant roles in Malaysian society. Their culture incorporates elements from Chinese, Malay and other ethnic groups, reflected through language, religion, clothing, cuisine, art and lifestyle. This cultural fusion has played a vital role in Malaysian society, thus becoming an integral part of the country's diverse cultural landscape.

The Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum in Malacca, Malaysia, features several examples of lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The objects inlaid with mother-of-pearl reflect the region's traditional cultural heritage. These exhibits emphasise the importance of mother-of-pearl inlay as both an ancient technique and a form of creative expression among local craftsmen. The lacquerware on display includes domestic objects and furniture decorated with intricate mother-of-pearl motifs. Elaborate designs exemplify the craftsmanship's aesthetic richness.

The museum's exhibits showcase various themes, including religion, traditional festivals and folk stories. Each highlights Malaysia's rich cultural heritage. As part of the heritage, lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl demonstrates the unique artistic expressions of local people.

By appreciating these exhibits, visitors acquire insights into Malaysia's history while admiring the exquisite craftsmanship of lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The confluence of Malaysian and Chinese cultures has inspired numerous new artistic expressions, including lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl. This category of furniture integrates Malay's unique cultural traditions with the traditional Chinese craft of inlaying mother-of-pearl. The artefacts underscore the fundamental elements of both cultures.

From the observation, craftsmen used exquisite wood as the base material for lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Through skilled inlay techniques, they added intricate patterns to the surface. These designs may feature flowers, birds, landscapes, abstract geometric forms, as well as symbolic motifs and ornaments. In addition to enhancing the furniture's aesthetic value, the mother-of-pearl inlay imbues the piece with a distinctive cultural charm.

Various images appear in the works. For example, one of the displayed items shows a silk painting hanging prominently in the centre. The painting depicted the concept of "san duo," or "three abundances," namely "fu" (福, fortune), "lu" (禄, prosperity) and "shou" (寿, longevity) (Figure 3). The painting also features the patterns of "bats" (福), "deer" (禄), and "cranes" (寿) to symbolise the auspicious meanings associated with the "three abundances". Displaying together the conceptual silk paintings are the mother-of-pearl furniture imbued with decorative design elements.



**Figure 3: Displays of Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Furniture and Ancestral Wall Panels in the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum**  
Source: Field photography by author during visit to Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, Malacca, Malaysia, 2024.

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In the centre, there is a painting of a phoenix (Figure 4). In traditional Chinese culture, the phoenix ranks second among the revered 'four mythical creatures' and has long been a symbol of the empress. The motif of 'a hundred birds paying homage to the phoenix' portrays a vision of harmony and prosperity under enlightened rule. The frames enhanced the painting with mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware.



**Figure 4: Central Wall Panel of the “Hundred Birds Paying Homage to the Phoenix” in the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum**

**Source: Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum exhibit, documented by author, 2024.**

As part of this heritage, lacquerware inlaid with mother-of-pearl showcases the unique interpretations of local craftsmen through a freestanding screen. The craftsmen used solid wood embedded with fine pieces of mother-of-pearl (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Freestanding Screen with Painted Scene of “Scholars Greeting an Official” and Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Frame**  
**Source: Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum field documentation, Malacca, 2024.**

Craftsmen chose high-quality indigenous wood as the foundational material for mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware. Subsequently, they employed meticulous inlay techniques to embellish the surface with a diverse range of patterns. These designs may comprise floral motifs, landscape scenes, abstract geometric shapes or symbolic ornaments. Such imagery enhances the furniture's overall visual richness (Figure 6).



**Figure 6: Narrow Vertical Silk Panels with Painted Literati Figures and Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Frames**  
**Source: Field documentation, Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, 2024.**

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Inlaying mother-of-pearl conveys the subject's distinctive historical importance. Besides enhancing the decorative and artistic value of furniture, lacquerware with inlaid mother-of-pearl demonstrates the exquisite craftsmanship of traditional Chinese artistry. It also reflects Malaysia's cultural elements, which symbolise the fusion of both cultures. This furniture holds a unique artistic appeal that embodies the cultural interactions between the peoples of the two nations. Over time, lacquerware with inlaid mother-of-pearl has become a notable feature of the Malaysian furniture industry, contributing to the distinctive aesthetic appeal of people's living environments.

While integrating certain Malay customs, the ancestral home museum retains its distinctly Chinese character. It is being valued by the local Chinese community. The spacious reception room, which used to welcome guests, serves as a venue for male family members to conduct business discussions. Its layout mirrors the traditional spatial arrangement of Chinese diaspora households, which closely resembles that found in Qing Dynasty official residences. All furnishings are designed to be balanced with furniture usually acquired in matching pairs to maintain visual symmetry.

The characteristic patterns observed in Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlay typically embody Malay cultural aesthetics while also incorporating elements of Chinese heritage. As illustrated in Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9 and Figure 10, the mother-of-pearl inlay in Malaysia frequently features diverse botanical motifs, including palm trees, coconut trees, flowers and leaves. These patterns reflect Malaysia's rich natural resources and tropical climate, as well as the populace's affinity for nature.



**Figure 7: Detail of Mother-of-Pearl Inlay on Malaysian Furniture Apron Panel**  
Source: Author's own photograph, Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, 2024.



**Figure 8: Malaysian Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Chair and Side Table Set with Floral Borders**  
Source: Photographed on-site at Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum by the author, 2024.

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**Figure 9: Floral and Symbolic Mother-of-Pearl Inlay on Carved Panel Frame in Malaysia**  
Source: Documented by author during field visit to Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, 2024.



**Figure 10: Round Malaysian Stool with Marble Top and Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Border**  
Source: Author's field photograph, Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, Malacca, Malaysia, 2024.

Various animals, including birds, wildlife and marine creatures are commonly depicted in Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlay patterns as observed in Figure 11 and Figure 12. These motifs symbolise the local ecosystem or bear mythical and religious significance. Similar to traditional Chinese styles, Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlay also employs geometric motifs such as floral designs, ornaments and symmetrical patterns. These geometric designs may represent abstract symbols or hold religious significance in Malaysian culture. Furthermore, Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlay often incorporates traditional decorative elements, including ornamental borders and filled patterns. Overall, these patterns showcase the distinctive features of Malaysian traditional culture.



**Figure 11: Malaysian Daybed with Elaborate Mother-of-Pearl Inlay Depicting Botanical and Faunal Motifs**  
Source: Documented by author during Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum field study, 2024.

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**Figure 12: Detail of Mother-of-Pearl Inlay on the Apron of the Malaysian Daybed**  
Source: Field observation by author, Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum, 2024.

The production of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware in Malaysia indeed incorporates traditional Chinese mother-of-pearl inlay techniques. It is blended with local geographical features and cultural elements. The outcome manifests in a distinctive artistic style. The emergence of this mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware results from cultural collision showcasing the following characteristics:

- i. Fusion of Chinese and Malaysian cultures: Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware blends traditional Chinese mother-of-pearl inlay techniques with local Malaysian cultural traditions by combining the essence of two distinct cultures. This fusion endows the lacquerware with both the traditional craftsmanship aesthetics of China and the unique regional cultural characteristics of Malaysia. Hence, it leads to a distinctive artistic style.
- ii. Reflection of regional characteristics: Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware often features local elements such as plants, animals and landscapes in its design patterns. These include palm trees, coconuts and tropical birds. The design's layout showcases Malaysia's diverse natural scenery and cultural traditions.
- iii. Rich colours: Compared to traditional Chinese mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware,
- iv. Malaysian lacquerware often exhibits more vibrant and contrasting colours. The images reflect Malaysian people's enthusiasm and vitality for life.
- v. Religious and ethnic elements: Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware has also incorporated religious elements of Islam and Malay culture. Star and crescent patterns are most commonly used in Islamic architecture.

Overall, Malaysian mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware, with its unique cultural blend and artistic creativity, displays a vibrant style. The product reflects the interaction and fusion of both cultures.

### Other Contemporary Research

Asia is the earliest known region to develop mother-of-pearl inlay techniques. It remains the most refined centre for this craft. China, Japan and Korea serve as the primary production hubs for mother-of-pearl lacquerware. The earliest known examples of this art form can be traced back to ancient China. Hui (2001) notes that mother-of-pearl lacquerware first appeared during the late Shang Dynasty, when craftsmen had already developed the ability to create complex decorative motifs. They often combine animal figures with geometric designs and outline them in red pigment. Changes in materials, techniques, and methodologies can be seen throughout various ruling eras, culminating in the contemporary approach.

In ancient China, mother-of-pearl lacquerware was regarded as a luxury item, usually reserved for the ruling elite and nobility. Hui (2001) further identifies nine archaeological sites where Shang Dynasty mother-of-pearl lacquerware has been uncovered with all complete patterns found within tomb contexts. Despite this, surviving artefacts from before the Tang Dynasty remain insufficient to offer a comprehensive understanding of the technique's early development.

Following a prolonged gap, the Tang dynasty experienced a significant revival of mother-of-pearl craftsmanship. During this period, large quantities of flat-detached mother-of-pearl were introduced to the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Technical methods strongly influenced mother-of-pearl production throughout the era (Sheng, 2005). Notably, the mother-of-pearl-inlaid bronze mirrors are a characteristic representation of the Tang Dynasty's diplomatic splendour. This period is regarded as the pinnacle of Chinese bronze mirror history.

Through technological innovation, the Song and Yuan periods marked a significant departure from the Tang and Five Dynasties in the artistic style of mother-of-pearl lacquerware, alongside the development of new craft techniques (Koji, 2011). The craft of mother-of-pearl lacquerware in China reached its peak during the Ming and Qing periods, mainly driven by tributes from various states.

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The technique has expanded in various directions with notable explorations in contemporary furniture design, artisanal jewellery, fashion and musical instruments. Li (2017) investigated innovative approaches to modernising mother-of-pearl craftsmanship, including mechanisation to replace manual labour, the adoption of foreign decorative techniques and the incorporation of new materials into furniture design. However, academic research on mother-of-pearl lacquerware has remained limited since the late Qing Dynasty. This restriction is primarily due to disruptions caused by warfare. Additionally, under prevailing consumer preferences for practicality, many modern mother-of-pearl products compromise both craftsmanship and material quality to reduce costs. Ultimately, this diminishes the public perception of the aesthetic art form.

In this context, it has become vital to create reasonably priced products that still maintain the 'artisan spirit'. Balancing accessibility with excellence in craftsmanship is crucial for preserving mother-of-pearl traditions in the modern market.

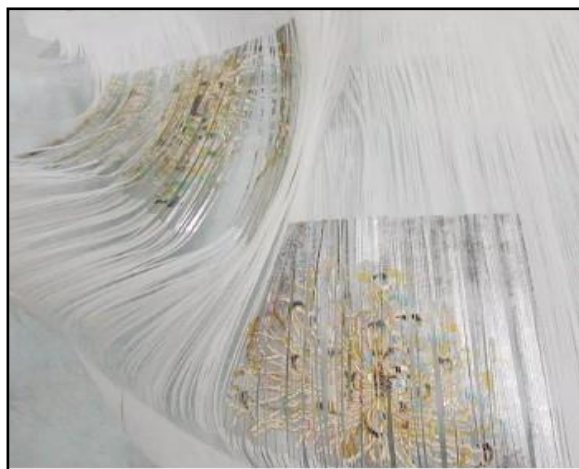
Lian (2017) examined the historical background of mother-of-pearl lacquerware in Jishan and Shanxi. She examined and analysed the cultural heritage of mother-of-pearl lacquerware craftsmanship in the areas focusing on materials, tools and patterns. She believes that the traditional craftsmanship is still maintained by the older generation of craftsmen who need proposals for inheritance. Liu (2013) provided a detailed review of domestic and international literature on lacquer tree research over the past ten years. The information covers resource distribution, chemical composition and current development status.

In Japan, Chinese cultural influence played a crucial role in shaping its mother-of-pearl lacquerware traditions. Japanese craftsmen eventually developed their own unique approach by emphasising holistic design. Cultural exchanges between China and Japan in the production of mother-of-pearl lacquerware began as early as the 17th century. Even earlier, during the Nara and Heian periods, luminous shells sourced from the Southwest Islands such as Okinawa were being transported to mainland China and other parts of Japan. The shells were already utilised in early Japanese works that closely resembled their Chinese counterparts in both style and technique. This is because Japanese mother-of-pearl lacquerware techniques were initially introduced directly from China.

Koji (2011) conducted long-term research on the history of Chinese mother-of-pearl, summarising its evolution in production. He believes there has been no research on the base materials of mother-of-pearl lacquerware. He proposed that studying the coatings and cross-sectional structures of mother-of-pearl lacquerware through microscopy and X-rays is an effective means of detection. The approach greatly aids in organising the chronological history of mother-of-pearl lacquerware. He provided the example by explaining that Korean mother-of-pearl craftsmanship has developed two new processing methods. These procedures were inspired by ancient Chinese techniques: the *uniform splitting method* and the *punching method*. Especially during the Joseon Dynasty, many works featured distinctive characteristics, including metal wire decorations and shell-cutting techniques.

Today, the products predominantly feature flat-detached mother-of-pearl. They are esteemed by the public as emblematic of national culture. The entire Korean Peninsula embodies a distinctive philosophy in the craftsmanship of mother-of-pearl lacquerware. These products highlight the opulence of decorative patterns. The decorative surfaces of the works appear intricate, with nearly every space being meticulously adorned. This approach markedly contrasts with Chinese and Japanese pieces.

Subsequently, the main features of Japanese mother-of-pearl decorations align with the aesthetic of nature and the *Zen* spirit. The designs include themes of flowers, birds, fish, trees, and cranes, rich in artistic concepts (Lee, 2012). Modern Japanese mother-of-pearl craftsmanship is applied not only to objects but also innovatively in textiles. The mother-of-pearl weaving technique draws inspiration from the Tang Dynasty's *kesi* silk weaving method of "continuous warp and broken weft". The mother-of-pearl pieces are polished and cut into threads about 0.1-0.2 millimetres thick to replace coloured boiled silk weft threads in *kesi* (Figure 13). The mother-of-pearl is woven into the fabric (Figure 14).



**Figure 13: Mother-of-Pearl Inlay and Silk Brocade Cutting Technique**

Source: Field photograph taken by author at Yangzhou Lacquerware Workshop, 2024.

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**Figure 14: Japanese Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Silk Fabric**

**Source: Image documented by author during study of contemporary Japanese lacquer artist Shin'ya Yamamura's work, Tokyo, 2024.**

Conversely, Japanese artist Shin'ya Yamamura embellishes his lacquer boxes with mother-of-pearl in a meticulously regular pattern that spans the entire surface. It creates a striking visual impact. His work showcases the technical prowess of modern shell inlay, attaining a notable level of compositional harmony. Instead of employing traditional motifs, Yamamura selects mother-of-pearl patterns to express his design concepts. His approach emphasises conceptuality by transforming mother-of-pearl inlay from a decorative element into an artistic innovation (Japan Kōgei Association, 2019). The innovation could also be seen in the Japanese painting technique.

*Makie*, or *dill* (*Japanese maki-e*), is a Japanese painting technique that is a source of pride in Japanese lacquer art. It is renowned for its intricate production process which results in extravagantly decorated lacquerware. The work is highly esteemed by the international lacquer art community. Mother-of-pearl inlay, as one of the *Makie* techniques possesses a distinctive artistic charm. The *Makie* mother-of-pearl decorative plate "Eternal" by Chinese lacquer artist Guo Xiaoyi employs various *Makie* techniques. The work showcases elegant shapes and vibrant colours. Mother-of-pearl is merely a small element within the lacquer decoration, combined with gold powder and eggshell to create a painting with deep significance. Compared with traditional mother-of-pearl inlay patterns, this artwork offers greater artistic and aesthetic value (Han & Guo, 2021).

In comparison to the contemporary Korean approach, Xu Jing's *Xuanhe's Mission to Goryeo Illustrated* (1985) notes that "the lacquer work lacks refinement". The mother-of-pearl craftsmanship is overly intricate, making it very difficult to master and the production cycle is lengthy. Hence, Korea continuously explores breakthroughs in design innovations with collaborative models as part of its journey of youthful transformation. For example, using shell colours as the base to break away from the traditional pairing with black lacquer has overall enhanced the brightness (Figure 15). The "florid and brocade-like" decorative style of Korean mother-of-pearl has undergone historical developments that have posed challenges to its inheritance. Both artists and local craftsmen are constantly attempting to transform to meet the interests of younger generations.



**Figure 15: Modern Mother-of-Pearl Work by Hyunju Kim from Craftree, Korea**

**Source: Photograph taken by author at Craftree Studio, Seoul, during field study in 2024.**



**Figure 16: Modern Vietnamese Mother-of-Pearl Lacquer Plate**

**Source: Field documentation by author at Chau Khe Village, Hanoi, Vietnam, 2024.**

Most mother-of-pearl inlays do not exist as the main decoration of the entire piece of lacquerware. The lacquerware is made solely to showcase the beauty of mother-of-pearl inlay. Instead, they often serve as a finishing touch that highlights the artistry of the lacquerware. Consequently, it relates to the contemporary emphasis on artistic conception in lacquer art. Korean lacquer art master Jeong Hae-Cho's "Mother-of-Pearl Black and Red Light Rhythm" in Figure 16 combines light and shadow. The image conveys a sense of light through pure colour contrast and the rhythmic undulation of forms. The mother-of-pearl inlay serves merely as a link between two objects, an auxiliary means of expressing light and shadow.

Furthermore, the Southeast Asia region is abundant in lacquer tree resources which have subsequently established lacquerware as a hallmark of Vietnam's cultural identity. This material is esteemed as a national treasure. In Chau Khe village, Hanoi, craftsmen frequently combine local lacquer with shells such as snails, clams and abalones in their mother-of-pearl lacquerware. The diversity of materials results in a broad spectrum of colours. For example, snail shells exhibit shades of green, red, yellow and blue; clam shells provide yellow, while abalone and mussel shells contribute dark green and red hues. The wide variety of mother-of-pearl materials and colours has led to the recognition of "Vietnamese mother-of-pearl lacquerware" for its vibrant multicoloured appearance. This variety offers a wide range of visual experiences (Hill, 1953).



**Figure 17: Modern Thai Mother-of-Pearl Lacquer Plate**

**Source: Author's visual record taken at Bangkok National Craft Centre during Southeast Asia survey, 2024.**

In the 18th century, the craft of mother-of-pearl was introduced to Thailand, initially used for royal furniture and Buddhist utensils (Figure 17). During the Bangkok Dynasty, mother-of-pearl lacquerware served as decorations in Buddhist culture. The common motifs are *mother-of-pearl inlaid copper*, *aluminium dragons* and *Tang grass*. It became popular among the people as lacquerware production advanced in the country. Factories produce mother-of-pearl lacquerware mainly in the *Bangkok style*. Tsai (2011) described the products as commonly featuring geometric patterns that provide a straightforward aesthetic experience.

As inlay techniques evolve and reform alongside innovations in methods, various countries are actively pushing past traditional boundaries to produce richer results by blending cultural heritage with modern technology. This shift provides meaningful insights for advancing inlay crafts. From a developmental standpoint, employing mother-of-pearl symbolises both delicate traditional icons and unique modern features. Ongoing efforts to adopt new techniques showcase a dedication to preservation. The transformation of traditional mother-of-pearl craftsmanship is advancing toward a more diverse future.

# The Cultural Review of Mother-of-Pearl Inlaid Lacquerware Development: Analysing the Evolution of Yangzhou Lacquerware, Peranakan Lacquerware and Arts from Japan and Korea

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, practice-led and comparative research methodology to examine the development, adaptation, and sustainability of mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware across different cultural contexts. The research combined field investigation, object-based visual analysis and literature review to ensure a comprehensive understanding of both traditional techniques and contemporary practices. Emphasis was placed on observing material processes, stylistic features, and cultural meanings embedded in the craft.

Fieldwork was conducted through on-site visits to key institutions and craft centres, including the Yangzhou Lacquerware Factory in China and the Baba Nyonya Heritage Museum in Melaka, Malaysia. These visits involved direct observation of production processes, examination of finished artefacts, and documentation through photography and written records. Particular attention was given to inlay techniques, material preparation, motifs and surface treatment, enabling detailed comparison across regional practices. Museum collections in Denmark and Scotland were also analysed to contextualise historical techniques and cross-cultural transmission.

In parallel, a systematic review of academic literature and contemporary case studies from Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia was undertaken to trace historical development, technological innovation and current challenges facing the craft. The collected data were analysed comparatively, focusing on continuity and transformation in techniques, materials and aesthetic principles. This triangulated approach enabled the study to identify shared characteristics, regional distinctions and sustainability issues, providing a structured framework for understanding the global evolution of mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware.

## FINDINGS

Based on an integrated methodology combining field investigation, object-based visual analysis, and literature review, this study finds that the development of mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware across different cultural contexts demonstrates both continuity and differentiation. The evolution of techniques, the use of materials, and modes of formal expression are consistently shaped by specific historical conditions underlying the cultural value systems.

First, within the Chinese context, particularly as represented by Qing Dynasty court traditions and the Yangzhou lacquerware lineage, mother-of-pearl inlay is characterised by an emphasis on highly refined material processing with complex technical procedures. Early Qing Museum collections reveal meticulous shell assemblage combined with poetic inscriptions with landscape imagery, while the Yangzhou pointed-shell inlay demonstrates rigorous control over shell thickness and point-setting techniques. These practices reflect a craft ethos centred on technical virtuosity and literati aesthetics. Such works function not merely as decorative objects but also as markers of social status and cultural identity, embodying scholarly ideals and notions of social order.

Second, within the cultural context of the Peranakan (Baba Nyonya) community in Malaysia, mother-of-pearl inlay demonstrates significant cross-cultural hybridity. Traditional Chinese inlay techniques are combined with locally sourced timber, tropical natural imagery and Malay aesthetic sensibilities. These result in decorative systems featuring floral, animal and auspicious motifs. While maintaining essential inlay practices, the works place greater emphasis on furniture function and spatial decoration, reflecting the practical needs of identity construction and cultural continuity within a diasporic setting.

Third, a comparative analysis of contemporary practices in Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia indicates a gradual shift from predominantly decorative approaches to conceptual and material-oriented expressions. In Japanese contemporary lacquer art, mother-of-pearl functions as a compositional element that contributes to visual rhythm. Korean practices negotiate a balance between dense ornamental traditions and modern design principles, while developments in Vietnam and Thailand expand visual possibilities through diverse shell materials and chromatic experimentation. These cases suggest that the sustainability of the craft increasingly depends on the reinterpretation of traditional techniques rather than their direct replication.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the sustainability of mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware is not solely a technical issue but also involves ongoing negotiation among material selection, technical logic, formal innovation and cultural context. Through comparative regional analysis, it becomes evident how traditional craftsmanship continuously repositions itself under contemporary conditions, preserving its core technical ethos while responding to changing aesthetic expectations, market dynamics, and cultural identities.

## CONCLUSION

### i. Value and Preservation of Traditional Techniques

The study highlights those traditional techniques, such as the *pointed-shell* inlay of Yangzhou lacquerware, exemplify the intricate craftsmanship and aesthetic sophistication of Chinese lacquer art. These techniques encompass complex material preparation, precise inlay procedures and rich cultural symbolism, including literati aesthetics and auspicious motifs. Preserving such skills is crucial not only for safeguarding the technical heritage but also for maintaining the cultural knowledge embedded within these practices.

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## ii. Cultural Fusion and Local Characteristics

Malaysian Baba Nyonya lacquerware exemplifies the distinctive results of cross-cultural interaction. Local craftsmen have integrated Malaysian flora, fauna and religious motifs into traditional Chinese mother-of-pearl inlay techniques. Hence, the works embody both aesthetic appeal and cultural symbolism. This synthesis enriches the visual vocabulary of the craft while emphasising its significance within multicultural environments, demonstrating how regional features can augment and diversify traditional artistic expression.

## iii. Modern Innovation and Technological Adaptation

Contemporary artists in Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia have extended the application of mother-of-pearl inlay into modern design, furniture, textiles and decorative arts. By integrating innovative design concepts, novel materials, and contemporary techniques, these practitioners have preserved the visual elegance of traditional inlay while expanding its aesthetic possibilities. Such adaptation demonstrates the potential for traditional crafts to remain culturally and economically viable in the modern era.

## iv. Challenges and Sustainability

Despite its artistic significance, the contemporary development of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware faces considerable challenges, including a declining number of skilled artisans, prolonged production cycles, high costs and competition from mass-produced decorative goods. Addressing these challenges necessitates comprehensive strategies that encompass craft education, technological innovation and market-oriented approaches to ensure the sustainability of the craft's production, transmission and appreciation.

## v. Research Implications and Future Directions

This study emphasizes the significance of comprehending mother-of-pearl lacquerware from both historical and cross-cultural perspectives. Comparative analyses of practices across various nations illuminate global patterns in the evolution of this craft. Future research and practice should focus on exploring innovative methods to incorporate traditional techniques into modern contexts, maintaining a balance between aesthetic and cultural integrity and ensuring accessibility and functionality. Such efforts will contribute to the continuous preservation, innovation and dissemination of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware.

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