

From Discipline to Healing: Research on the Practice Transformation and Value of Contemporary “Women’s Handicraft”

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Abstract: This study employs an interdisciplinary approach combining material feminism and trauma theory to systematically examine how traditional “women’s needlework” practices, particularly those centered on “piercing” and “sewing”, have transformed from tools of female discipline into effective mediums for contemporary women’s physical/mental healing and cultural empowerment. Material feminism emphasizes the interplay between body, material, and discourse, revealing how needles, threads, and fabrics are not passive tools but active participants in shaping creative processes, influencing emotional experiences, and co-creating meaning. The therapeutic mechanisms of needlework practices manifest through three dimensions: bodily engagement, metaphorical expression of trauma, and value reconstruction of traditional skills. Trauma theory focuses on non-verbal and fragmented traumatic experiences, while needlework practices provide unique pathways for articulating such experiences, offering critical analytical perspectives for understanding their healing processes. The research posits that needlework practices not only regulate the nervous system at the physiological level but also provide symbolic expressions for unspoken trauma at the psychological level, thereby reconstructing the body-mind connection. Ultimately, at the cultural level, these practices consolidate fragmented personal experiences into collective archives, enabling women to co-create historical narratives, elevate individual healing into collective cultural power, and achieve the reconstruction and empowerment of female agency.

Keywords: Women’s handwork; Art therapy; Trauma narrative; Material feminism

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1. Introduction: The origin of the problem

Nühong (women’s needlework), referring to traditional crafts like weaving, sewing, and embroidery practiced by women, is also known as female craftsmanship or women’s skill^[1]. In contemporary art practice, this craft centered on embroidery is undergoing a profound transformation in meaning. It has evolved from a tool that constrained women into a medium for self-healing and individual expression, a process that merits deep reflection. This article introduces the theoretical perspective of material feminism to analyze the internal logic of its shift from a disciplinary tool to a therapeutic and expressive medium.

Material feminism challenges the traditional mind-body dichotomy by emphasizing the interplay between physical

objects, materiality, and discourse in practice. From this perspective, needles, threads, and fabrics are not passive tools. Through daily interactions with women, such as needlework, caressing, and wrapping, they co-create a history intertwined with the body. This history is dual: the discipline of needlework imprints itself on both material and body through repetitive labor, while women entrust their unspoken inner worlds to these materials, allowing them to be carried. Thus, these objects serve as archives that not only record disciplinary history but also preserve women's emotions. Material feminism offers a new perspective, revealing that material objects are not passive entities, they carry historical weight while being reinterpreted in contemporary practice, establishing new dialogues about self and healing. Simultaneously, trauma theory focuses on organizing and expressing fragmented experiences that defy direct verbal expression.

In today's fast-paced, information-overloaded society, individuals frequently grapple with mental health challenges like anxiety, attention deficits, and identity confusion. These psychological states resonate with trauma theory's concepts of dissociation and narrative disintegration. As a form of non-verbal storytelling, women's needlework provides a unique pathway to express and integrate these pervasive modern dilemmas.

2. The practice of discipline and cultivation

Throughout history, needlework has served as a non-verbal medium for women to express themselves. They channel their unspoken emotions, hidden desires, and boundless imagination into the needle and thread. From a material feminist perspective, these embroidered works transcend mere objects, they are vectors for emotional expression. Iconic patterns like "Fish Playing Among Lotus" and "Phoenix Piercing Peony" go beyond decorative beauty, subtly conveying aspirations for love and marital bliss. Designs such as "Hundred Children" and "Infinite Melon Offspring" further weave blessings for family prosperity into everyday garments. Thus, needlework has long transcended its craft, evolving into a practice steeped in profound emotion.

In traditional Confucian social structures, needlework was imbued with profound ethical significance and systematically incorporated into the "Four Virtues" framework, serving as a core instrument for disciplining women's physical and moral development. From the perspective of material feminism, materials like needles, threads, and fabrics are not neutral entities but carriers of power dynamics. Applying Foucault's theory, we can more clearly discern the ultimate goal of this power operation: "cultivating docile bodies"^[2]. The body can be both a molded object and an efficient tool. Under this lens, needlework exemplifies a disciplinary practice: through repetitive, meticulous, and time-consuming physical labor, it transforms the instinct of "movement" into the virtue of "stillness," shaping women's bodies into conforming objects that are both docile and productive, in line with Confucian social norms.

However, viewing it solely as an oppressive yoke obscures its richer connotations. Material feminism emphasizes the agency of materiality. Within the macro framework of "women's needlework," embroidery practices require practitioners to enter a state of "stopping, stabilizing, calming, and settling", a mental-body state that aligns perfectly with the self-cultivation logic from The Great Learning, where "knowing when to stop leads to steadiness; steadiness enables calmness; calmness fosters peace; peace allows contemplation; contemplation yields achievement"^[3].

"Knowing when to stop" establishes goals through pattern, color, and stitch selection. "Steadiness" manifests as physical stability and rhythmic breathing, with hand-eye coordination gradually achieving mental focus. "Calmness" involves emotional grounding and inner serenity through repetitive motions. "Peace" further reflects acceptance of process imperfections. "Contemplation" brings mental clarity and creative spontaneity in stability. Ultimately, "achievement" signifies not just the completion of a work, but also the attainment of self-identity and spiritual healing. Through this process, women's needlework transcends mere craftsmanship to become a spiritual practice.

Through this practice, external ritual norms are transformed into bodily focus and serenity, extending the Confucian ideal of "self-cultivation" from the moral level to the physical and mental realms, thereby realizing this Confucian ideal. From the perspective of contemporary psychotherapy, this practice aligns closely with mindfulness meditation and the "grounding technique" in trauma healing, shifting attention from internal turmoil to the external environment. It provides

modern individuals with a practical, everyday approach to self-regulation and emotional management.

3. The presence of the body and the narrative of metaphor

Traumatic experiences often cause the separation between the body and the self, a phenomenon known as “dissociation” ^[4]. Healing this physical and psychological disconnection is the first step in recovery, where needlework plays a crucial role. From the perspective of material feminism, its therapeutic function stems from the synergistic resonance between the body and material through their interaction.

Needlework is a repetitive, rhythmic physical activity that helps regulate bodily functions and heart rate, effectively alleviating anxiety and hyperarousal. “Healthy individuals experience steady, rhythmic heart rate fluctuations during breathing. A high heart rate variability indicates good health ^[5].” This physiological regulation isn’t just an internal bodily response, it’s a resonance created through the body’s interaction with materials. Specifically, it involves rhythmic movements, tactile feedback, and physiological responses: the steady thread-piercing motion calms breathing, which in turn stabilizes hand movements. The smooth sensation of silk threads threading through fabric sends signals of ‘safety’ and ‘order’ to the brain, creating a stable foundation for deeper psychological healing. From a materialist feminist perspective, needles, threads, and fabric aren’t passive tools, they’re active participants guiding the body’s coordinated regulation of the nervous system.

In the creative process, tactile engagement forms a crucial and continuous perceptual dimension. The sustained contact between fingers and fabric or thread provides rich, gentle, and enduring tactile stimulation. This stimulation helps divert attention from internal fears, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts, focusing the mind on the present material world. In trauma therapy, this method of redirecting attention to immediate sensory experiences is called “grounding techniques,” which proves essential for managing traumatic triggers and dissociative episodes ^[6]. Hermann emphasizes that the first stage of healing involves establishing a sense of security. Grounding techniques counteract the sense of loss of control experienced during trauma, with their core purpose being to help clients establish a sense of control and security in the present moment, thereby combating traumatic helplessness ^[7]. Needle and thread work thus becomes a daily, self-directed grounding practice. By regulating the nervous system and enhancing bodily awareness, it achieves synergistic healing between the body and material. Through their specific physical properties, needles, threads, and fabrics collectively construct a stable and authentic perceptual space where mind and body can find refuge, laying an indispensable foundation for deeper psychological recovery.

Traumatic memories are often non-verbal and fragmented. Embroidery provides a pathway for expressing and integrating these unspoken experiences. From the dual perspectives of material feminism and trauma theory, the act of needle-piercing serves as a tense signifier. It simulates the violation of physical and psychological boundaries during traumatic events, evoking repetitive associations of pain. However, the crucial point lies in how this “piercing” action in embroidery practice is entirely controlled by the creator’s position, depth, and frequency. Through repeated active piercing, the symbolic re-establishment of boundaries transforms passive traumatic memories into a restorative experience of “I control the boundaries.” This process embodies the “subjective reconstruction through material participation” emphasized by material feminism.

Corresponding to “piercing,” “sewing” symbolizes connection and integration. Trauma shatters an individual’s life narrative, while sewing represents the proactive act of reuniting fragments into a whole. Notably, this integration does not erase scars but, as seen in “golden stitch” art that highlights rather than covers cracks with gold powder, the embroidery’s stitching makes fragmented marks distinctly visible within the new whole. This precisely captures the essence of post-traumatic growth, actively assigning new meaning to traumatic history while acknowledging its existence.

4. From private skills to public narratives

Historically, needlework served as a tool to discipline women's bodies and virtues, relegated to the status of a secondary "craft" in art history. Women's private experiences, emotions, and traumas were often overlooked and suppressed. As a time-honored "female text," needlework provided a medium to document these experiences. Contemporary artists incorporate old garments, household textiles, and personal memories into their creations, participating in narrative reconstruction. They transform their personal stories and sufferings into healing practices, weaving them into the broader historical memory. This approach transcends individuality, fostering a sense of collective belonging.

Lin's 1997 work "Entangled, Then Cut Open" provides a vivid paradigm for the transformation of women's handicrafts. Using cotton thread, the artist employs the repetitive "entanglement" technique, a hallmark of traditional needlework, to wrap and seal hundreds of kitchen items, transforming them from functional tools into objects of contemplation. On one hand, the endless entanglement mirrors the ceaseless repetition and physical constraints of domestic labor, metaphorically reflecting women's confinement within domestic spaces. On the other hand, Lin explains that during her postpartum depression, this repetitive entanglement became a form of healing^[8].

By consciously controlling this "entanglement" process, she transformed passive domestic labor into a self-directed therapeutic practice. Crucially, the work concludes with a decisive "cut," symbolically breaking the constraints represented by the entanglement. This act shifts from passive endurance to active choice. Through the artist's creative process, the symbolic cotton thread is fundamentally reinterpreted: it evolves from a tool of constraint into a medium of liberation through controlled entanglement, a healing practice that ultimately declares emancipation. Although Lin rejects feminist labels, her work elevates personal healing into collective cultural power, achieving the reconstruction and empowerment of female agency.

From the perspective of material feminism, the devaluation of women's craftsmanship was accompanied by the denial of their economic worth. As Rozsika Parker noted: "When women practiced embroidery, it was neither recognized as art nor valued as such, it was reduced to a mere expression of femininity. Crucially, it was classified as a craft. At the time, embroidery increasingly became the exclusive domain of women's pastimes, who performed unpaid domestic labor^[9]." This passage precisely captures the global predicament of "women's needlework": its value was confined to the display of "femininity," while being excluded from both serious art history and mainstream economic evaluations.

Yet it is precisely this historical context that serves as the foundation for contemporary practitioners to engage in creative transformation and value reevaluation. Today, "women's needlework" represented by embroidery has successfully transcended the boundaries between "crafts" and "art," reasserting its significance in global art markets and cultural spheres. For instance, in the artistic domain, artists like Lin and Yin have elevated the conceptual dimensions of embroidery and sewing techniques, transforming them into serious artistic expressions exploring bodily identity, memory, and historical narratives. Their works are now collected by top-tier art museums, attaining cultural value.

In addition, in the commercial realm, luxury fashion houses, independent designer brands, and handicraft e-commerce platforms are redefining handcrafted embroidery as a core element of luxury. Here, traditional "women's needlework" skills are no longer associated with "cheapness" or "amateurism," but have evolved into scarce, high-value-added elements imbued with storytelling and warmth. Thus, the contemporary transformation of "women's needlework" represents a successful "value revolution." By infusing traditional skills with profound conceptual depth and unique narrative power, practitioners collectively challenge and rewrite the historical narrative described by Parker.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through the historical tracing and the analysis of three dimensions of body, mind and culture, shows that the healing and empowerment of contemporary women by women's handwork is not a linear process of a single level, but a dynamic process involving physiology, psychology and culture. In this process, women's needlework first functions as a practical activity. Through its repetitive, rhythmic stitching motions and subtle tactile feedback, it directly engages

the physical body, effectively calming an overstimulated nervous system and establishing a stable, controllable mental-body equilibrium. This lays the physiological groundwork for deeper healing. On the psychological level, it serves as a metaphorical narrative where the needle and thread transcend their physical roles, becoming symbolic language for expressing and integrating trauma. This process transforms indescribable inner visions into concrete, controlled symbolic expressions. Culturally, it represents a value-reassessment movement that courageously brings historically constrained, private female crafts into public view, transforming them into tools for self-identity and collective empowerment. When individuals incorporate their traumatic memories and emotional narratives into artworks, they not only heal themselves but also participate in a collective effort to rewrite women's history. Through shared experiential connections, this process achieves a sublimation from individual healing to collective resonance. The contemporary practice of women's needlework reveals a truth: the needle and thread, once used to bind and discipline women, can be transformed into a powerful tool for liberation and expression through the creative agency of the individual. This not only marks a transformation of women's needlework in contemporary practice but also offers a new perspective on understanding the value of handicrafts in modern society.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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