



THE  
SLOW  
HANDS  
LAB



# **The Slow Hands' Lab**

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**A Thesis Project by  
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## THE HISTORY OF SU EMBROIDERY ART

Suzhou embroidery (Su embroidery for short) was originated in Suzhou, China and later on spread to the neighboring areas such as Nantong and Wuxi in Jiangsu province. These areas, located in the lower reach of Youngest River, have been famous for their high quality silk productions for centuries. The fertile soil, mild temperature, and booming production of silk fabric and thread naturally nourished the burgeoning and flourishing of Suzhou embroidery.

According to "Shuo Yuan", written by Liu Xiang during the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC - 24 AD), the country of Wu (current Suzhou area) has started to use embroidery to decorate garments over 2,000 years ago. As described in the book of "Secret Treasures of Qing," the Suzhou embroiders in Song Dynasty (960-1279) used "needles that could be as thin as the hair."

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Suzhou has become a thriving center for silk industries and handicrafts. Artists in Wu area, represented by Tang Yin (Bohu) and Shen Zhou, helped the further development of Suzhou embroidery. Embroiders reproduced their paintings using needles. These works were so vivid and elegant as to be called "paintings by needle" or "unmatchable even by the nature." Since then, Suzhou embroidery evolved a style of its own in needlework, color plan and pattern.

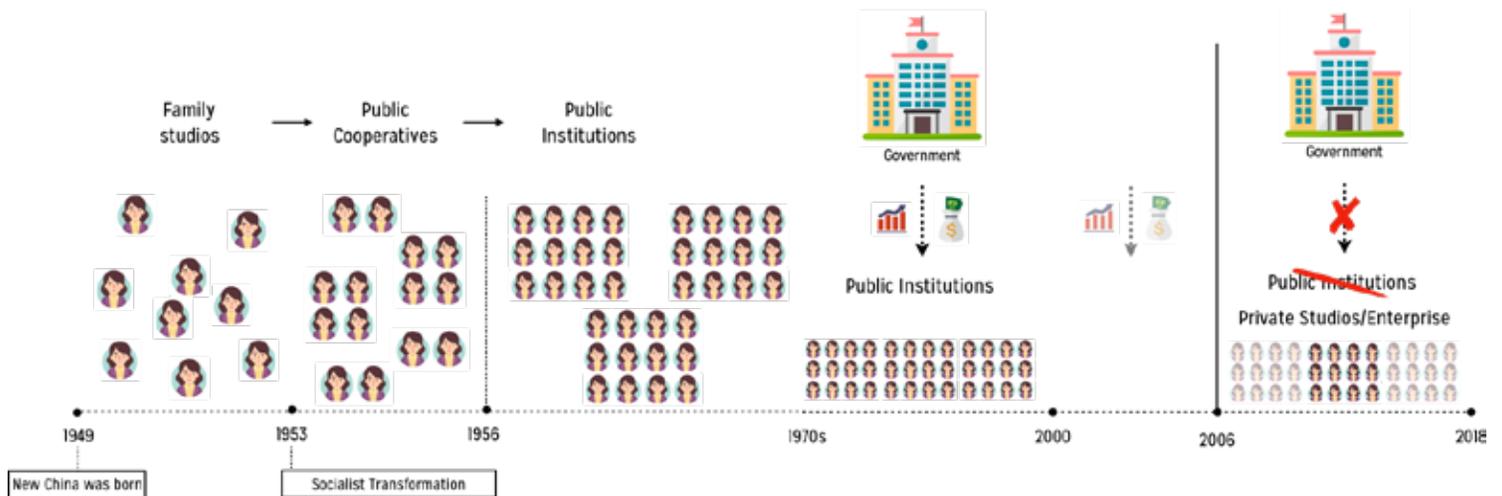
At the turn of the 20th century, under the influence of Western civilization, Suzhou embroidery artists started to seek innovations as well. Shen Yunzhi (1874-1921), a master in Suzhou embroidery, integrated the effect of portraits in oil-painting into her embroidery work, and created a new style called "realistic embroidery." In 1904, Shen made eight pieces of embroidery works for the Empress Dowager Cixi as her 70th birthday present.

In the early 1930s, a new style of Suzhou embroidery needlework, named "random-stitchwork" was created by Yang Shouyu, director of the embroidery department at the Zhengze Girls' Vocational School in Danyang, Jiangsu.

In the 1950's, research institutes and workshops were established in Suzhou area. Embroidery artists were able to devote themselves to research and development of new or lost embroidering skills. They use various kinds of needlework, thread, and fabric to create vivid portraits of landscape, flowers, birds, and figures.



# THE BIG PROBLEM



Along with China's earlier development, the structure of Su Embroidery artists' community has been changing. After new China was born in 1949, most embroidery artists operate their own family studios. During Socialist Transformation from 1953 to 1956, the structure of embroidery communities has shifted from family studios to public cooperatives. Then, the cooperatives have assembled to public institutions. From the late 1970s to 2000, the government has funded and increased social exposures for the artists' group.

However, in pursuit of greater economic growth, the government gradually cut down its support of the handicraft industry, including the Su Embroidery artists' institutions. In 2006, Su embroidery was included in the first batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage list. In the same year, the government cut off all their funds and stop promoting the artists' group. All of a sudden, the structure of the artists' community went back to private studios, where they were 57 years ago. Without the government's support, the artisans' group lacks funds and social exposure.

## THE BIG PROBLEM

Till now, a very small amount from the younger generations are learning Su Embroidery art, while a large group of professional artists are reaching their retirement age. Zhang Yan, An author in The Silk Road calculated that “In 10 years, with no one to inherit this technique, Su embroidery will be at risk of loss.”

As a Chinese citizen that sees traditional culture as the root of our country, I had a heart-breaking moment when learning this fact.



## PROBLEM REFRAMING

According to my research and interviews with Su Embroidery artists, I learned that since 2006, due to government's decisions on cutting off funds and social support, along with a swift changing of the modern market and the emergence and uprising of machine embroidery, the traditional Su Embroidery artwork that maintains a high price, is less favorable than it was 10 years ago. Su Embroidery artists are having a very hard time selling their artworks.

94% of the Su embroidery artists started their embroidery learning since a very young age (18 years old on average). Embroidery is their one and only technique on earning wages. Among the artists I interviewed, over 89% of them are under the livelihood pressure, and 78% of them have to

undertake hard of family expenditure.

As a result, their ongoing economic crisis throughout recently 10 years significantly influence their daily life and threatens their livelihoods.





**150**  
studios

**100,000**  
Artists

**80%**  
are below the  
poverty threshold

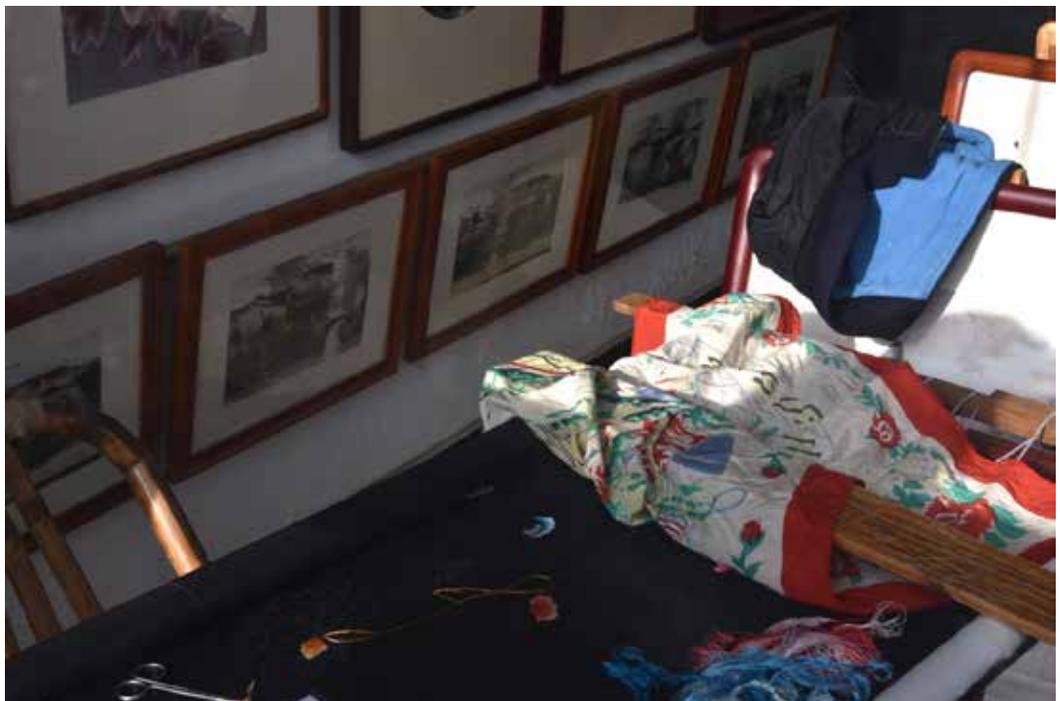
From my research, there are 150 studios and 100,000 Su embroidery artists in the Suzhou area, and nearly all of them are women. 80% of the artists are below the poverty threshold, which is 428 dollars per month.

To better understand the Su Embroidery artists' situation, I conducted 60 interviews including 56 artists and four executives from 8 studios in Suzhou, China. I used a user-centered approach to learn the artists' work and life and listened to their concerns and needs.

Speaking of the artists' daily operation, their cost goes up. Xiao, a 43-year-old artist mentions: "The price of our rent went up. The threads, needles, silk and all other necessities also got more expensive each year." Besides, their time spending on materials goes up, "We've been spending a huge amount of time looking for good

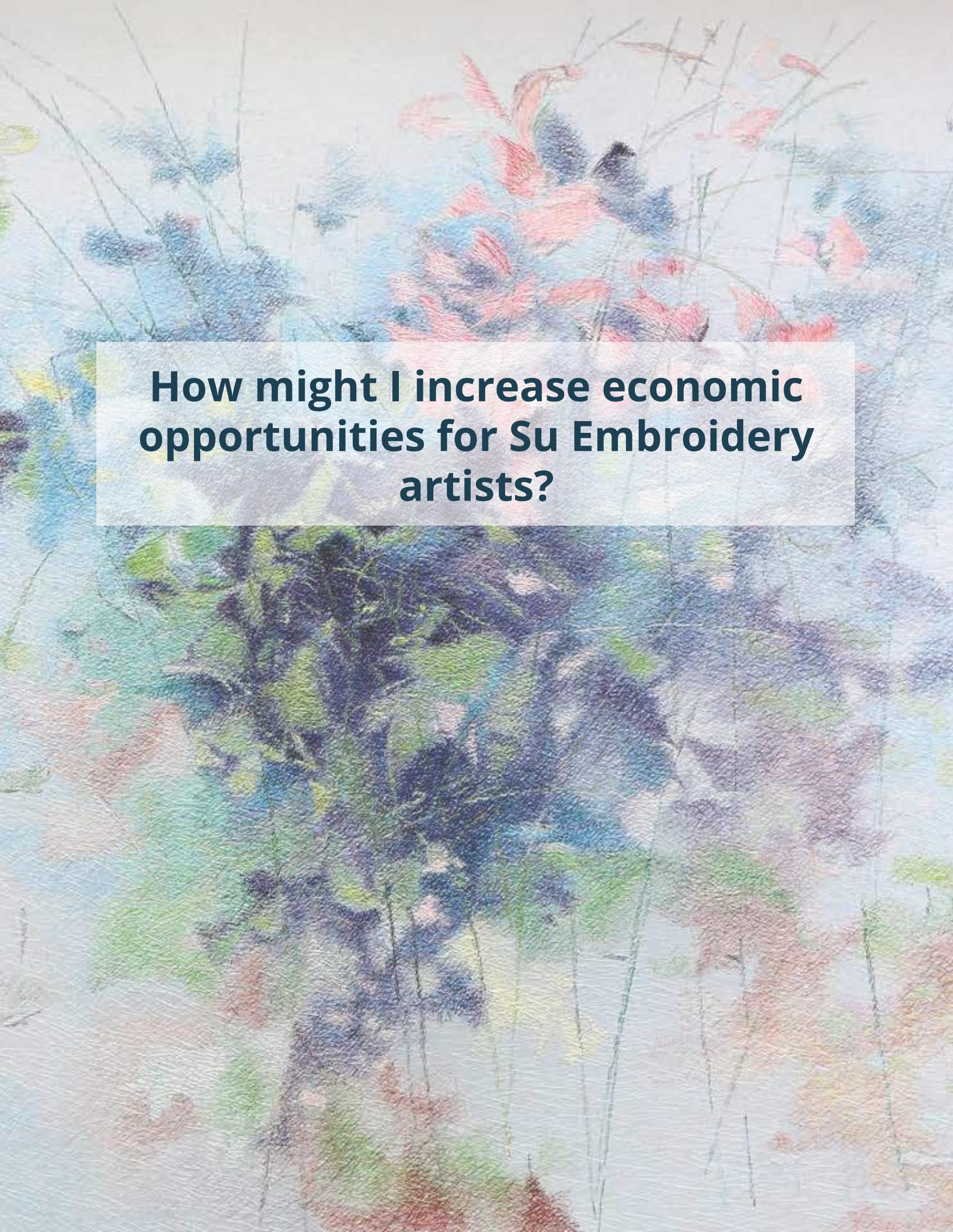
materials and necessities for the artwork, since only a few factories are making them” Wanyi, 37-year-old artist stated. She also says that with higher concentration and efforts, they work much harder than before, hoping the artwork pieces can be sold for a reasonable price.

On the opposite, the studios’ daily sale goes down, “10 years ago, we could sell three works in only one week. It now takes us a half month to sell one.” Lei, another artist, complains that they’ve experienced a worse situation, which is no income for over two months. At the same time, the artists feel that the whole society devalues them, Shan, a 39-year-old artist didn’t hold back her tears when talking about finding her career value is going down day after day. Also, continuous lack of visitors and attention from the mainstream society leads to their feelings of isolation, self-abasement, and hopelessness.



## Initial Problem Statement

After communicating with the Su embroidery artists on the understanding of their situation, many of them acknowledge that because of their slow acceptance from the changing market as well as lack of access to innovations, they are gradually disconnected with the outside world. This brings a huge gap between the artists and the consumers on sharing their stories and creating their economic opportunities.



**How might I increase economic opportunities for Su Embroidery artists?**



I discovered their market space first.

Their main product is framed artwork; the price is ranging from \$1,500 to \$50,000. These artworks stay in an art gallery inside the studio and are waiting for the buyers to come.

The buyers are split into two groups: Tourist and wealthy embroidery lovers. After taking a tour inside the artists' studio, few tourists will take a smaller artwork back home, while some embroidery lovers will purchase larger sized artworks as gifts to business partners or for their own house decorations.

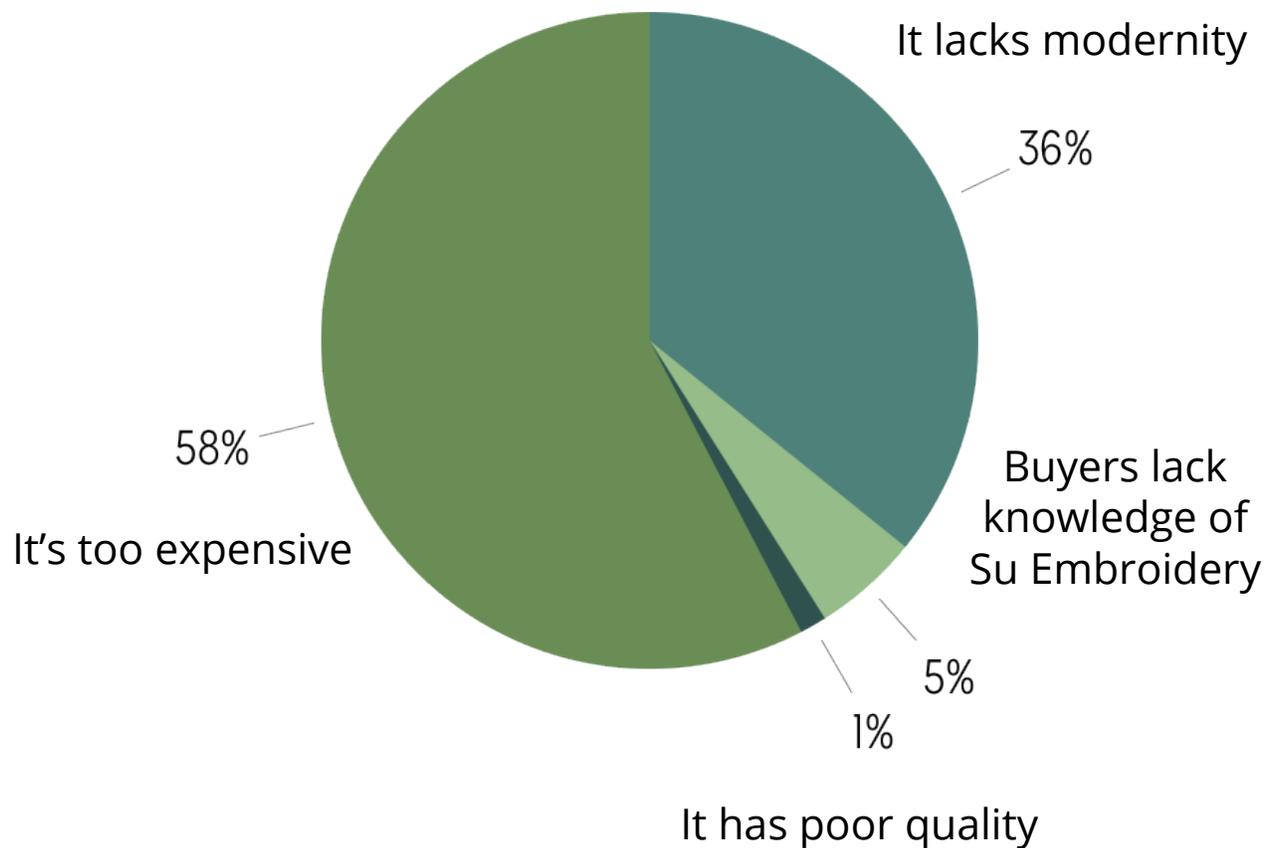
However, the studios are losing both groups: due to the lack of social exposure, decreasing number of the tourists are visiting their studios; the market has changed in China that wealthy buyers would rather buy stocks and real estate instead of fine arts. One artist mentioned, "Every month, we are praying that at least one artwork can be sold so that the whole team can try to make a living."

*" We've tried some new themes of the artworks, but without much progress... We need to find undiscovered space for our technique. It could lead us to grow and develop in a much stronger way. However, without any support, we will have to start from scratch. "*

Xu  
Professional Su Embroidery Artist  
with 30 years experience

In order to learn this problem from the consumers' side, I conducted a survey In China about people's understanding of Su embroidery and Su embroidery artists. I received 230 responses. The following chart is the result of the most insightful response in the survey: "lack of modernity" and "too expensive" are two main reasons leads to the sharply decreased sale of Su embroidery art.

### The reasons why people don't buy Su Embroidery Art



## Hypothesis

In my hypothesis, by creating a new market space that is modernized and has lower price range, the Su embroidery artists can have an opportunity to deliver their unique and precious technique to the modern consumers. Thus, it could help them have their economic opportunities increased. They can also have their value acknowledged by the public by using the new market as a carrier to tell their own stories.

## DEFINED TARGET AUDIENCE

I define my target audience as professional Su embroidery artist who is 30 to 50 years old, with 10 to 30 years experience, live in the Suzhou area and live under financial pressure.

First, they are passionate about their jobs and seeking development; second, they are willing to accept innovations in their field; third, they could work collaboratively with other groups or parties.



## **Thesis Statement**

I, Jiayi Dong, am co-creating a new market space where the Su Embroidery artists can cater their techniques to modern consumers , so that they can receive increased economic opportunities and have their value recognized by the public.

## PROTOTYPING

When I started brainstorming the possible solutions for this problem, the first word that comes to my mind is "fashion". I love fashion, because it has attitudes, and it tells different stories of different people. Also due to my past work experience, I believe that the power of fashion might be an excellent carrier to deliver Su embroidery artists' technique and share their stories.

So I went to talk to professional fashion designers.

During the individual conversations with Tara, Ashley and Saumya, we discuss the possibility and feasibility of fitting Su embroidery in the modern market that appeals to the consumers, and how could it look like.



Tara  
Fashion Designer



Ashley  
Accessories Designer



Saumya  
Accessories Designer



## PROTOTYPING

After my conversation with professional fashion designers, I made moodboards that provides concepts on modernizing Su embroidery

## PROTOTYPING

Then, looking for the next step, along with introduction of Su embroidery art, I brought the moodboards to a larger group of people.

And I asked: "Where do you want to see these?"

To get more thoughts from the public, I joined eight crafting and sewing related workshops and meet up events located in New York, and five embroidery related online groups in China. The reason I joined events that are relative to sewing and crafting is that the attendees are already passionate about the hand making field and have basic knowledge about hand making, the communication will be easy to be opened, and their emotional connections with my topic could be stronger. And the result was, they delivered very honest and detailed responses to me.

Moreover, I went to representatives in sustainable fashion field such as Eileen Fisher and Reformation for their professional opinions; I asked help from reputed sustainable fashion organizations including Remake and Fashion for Good; I went to crafting spots Textile Art Center and Craft Jam and looked for their opinions on transferring the idea into reality.

Back in China, I joined embroidery relative groups in Douban, Zhihu and Wechat. Through these channels, I communicated with online users about my projects, and asked for their thoughts on the moodboards.



## PROTOTYPING



18 interests



10 interests



3 interests

After talking to a larger group of potential customers, professionals, and insiders, and asking the interest on goods of modernized Su embroidery art that they want to own, I got 18 interests on the handbag, 10 interests on the patch on clothing, and 3 interests on jewelry.

I decided to prototype on handbag making and patches making, and see what the embroidery artists and the test group that I connected during conversations think.



On the one hand, collaborating with a professional handbag designer and Su embroidery artists, I co-designed handbags with Su embroidery. From designing the patterns that are eligible to represent the essence of Su embroidery artists' technique, to picking the material of the handbag, the frame of the handbag, and the color palette that could highlight the Su embroidery art.

I got positive feedback from both designers and artists.

Initially, the designer really liked the idea of putting Su embroidery art on a handbag, which she believes are able to deliver a very special and fabulous looking. She enjoyed learning the Su embroidery culture and understanding the beauty of it, and she mentioned that discussing with the artists about the design from concepts to details was very helpful on moving forward during the design process.





From the artist side, this co-design process was a brand new experience for them, but they feel familiar. There are moments when a couple of artists discussing their deliverables on their artwork with each other, sharing opinions, and giving feedback. So they really enjoyed this experience on handbags making, and feel involved. They would love more moments like this where they can truly feel visible and valued.

Surprisingly, this prototypes conducted by three different parties worked smoothly and collaboratively.

PROTOTYPING





On the other hand, I created an Instagram account about Su embroidery and started posting artworks from the artists.

Then, I hosted two small events called “Ensoule your wardrobe” in Madison Square Park and Washington Park. Aiming in exploring the artists' economic opportunities and upcycle consumers' wardrobe, I firstly I explained Su embroidery to people and artists' situations, and invited people to co-design embroidery patches they would like to have on their old clothes that could both help the artists out and add new value to their clothes. In the end, I shared people with a small intro card including the Instagram account I created.





Some positive feedback was collected, and people loved hearing the story about Su embroidery art and the artists. However, their responses to creating patches on clothes are low.



## PROTOTYPING

## PROTOTYPING

After these two prototypes, I detailedly explained to the embroidery artists on the two different working processes: With handbag co-creation, artists are involved into the design process and could put their creative thoughts and do freestyle on embroideries; with patches personalization, artists are taking orders directly from the consumers, and the patterns are solid with limited space for creation.

Majority of the artists are into the handbag co-creation because it delivers their embroidery technique in a more modernized and outstanding way. With many years contributing to artworks, artists are more comfortable with the room of creativity. Also, they developed a sense of confidence and inclusion when being asked advice and giving thoughts to us during the design process.

*“Definitely bags, more space to show my techniques, higher price range so that I can support my family, and most importantly, I love bags.”*

Lei  
Professional Su Embroidery Artist  
With 26 years experience

*“I prefer doing embroidery on bags, where I could deliver my own thoughts. Patches sound boring and lifeless to me.”*

Jianying  
Professional Su Embroidery Artist  
With 20 years experience

## PROTOTYPING

Only a few artists supports the embroidery patch creation. Due to the very different working process from framed artworks, where embroidery artists' profession stands, making patches requires different kinds of thread with constraints of clothing materials that vary from orders, which brings the artist group new questions and challenges. For instance, one customer ordered a piece of embroidery art of a puppy head on the back of his denim jacket. The thread required on denim is much thicker than the artists' regular thread, and it leads hardship for the artists to exhibit the reality of the feature. In addition, less creation space are open to the artists; instead, the artists have to strictly follow the original draft provided by the customer that makes the artist uncomfortable. Also, as a popular option for patches, machine making is cheaper and quicker than hand making. The artists are also concerned about their future path on patch making.

From the two prototypes, I learned that even though with livelihood threatens, the artists are very proud of their job. They refine on their professions and want their work to be exhibited distinctly and uniquely. They are very excited to try innovations, and they love to contribute themselves for the future of their career and the future of Su embroidery.

*"We will need strict material constraints for the patches, which might limit the potential to attract customers."*

Ming

Professional Su Embroidery Artist  
With 17 years experience

Finally,  
together,  
we found a common ground:

handbag creating.

Through creating handbags, we want to open a new market space for the Su Embroidery artists, where they could deliver their unique techniques. Thus, they can have their economic opportunities increased, and have their value acknowledged.

# INTERVENTION



My project name aims to ask a question:  
*"Can traditional crafting artists keep up with the speeds of modern society, and expose their true value ?"*

## INTERVENTION

For the final intervention, I paired the Su Embroidery artist group with a New-York based fashion label, behno to co-create a handbag collection.

I chose this brand for the following reasons:

The brand's mission is to bring sharp awareness to sustainability and ethics to fashion; the founder of the brand shows his intention to set a new standard for manufacturing and revolutionizes the way garment workers and artisans are treated. The brand is a fair trade company, as they bring fair wages and benefits to their employees; the brand attaches importance to women's rights; the products of the brand are mostly handmade that applies to the artists' technique; the brand is transparent on sharing stories about the embroidery artists. After showing essential products of the brand, the artists like the style that the brand delivers.

Last but not least, the brand's business values are aligned with the artists' values, which are collaborative, friendly, diligent, and integrate.

Referring to the moodboards I made, we co-designed a collection of three handbags, in pursuit of delivering the essence of the unique technique that Su embroidery artists possess, and as well as appeal to the modern consumers.

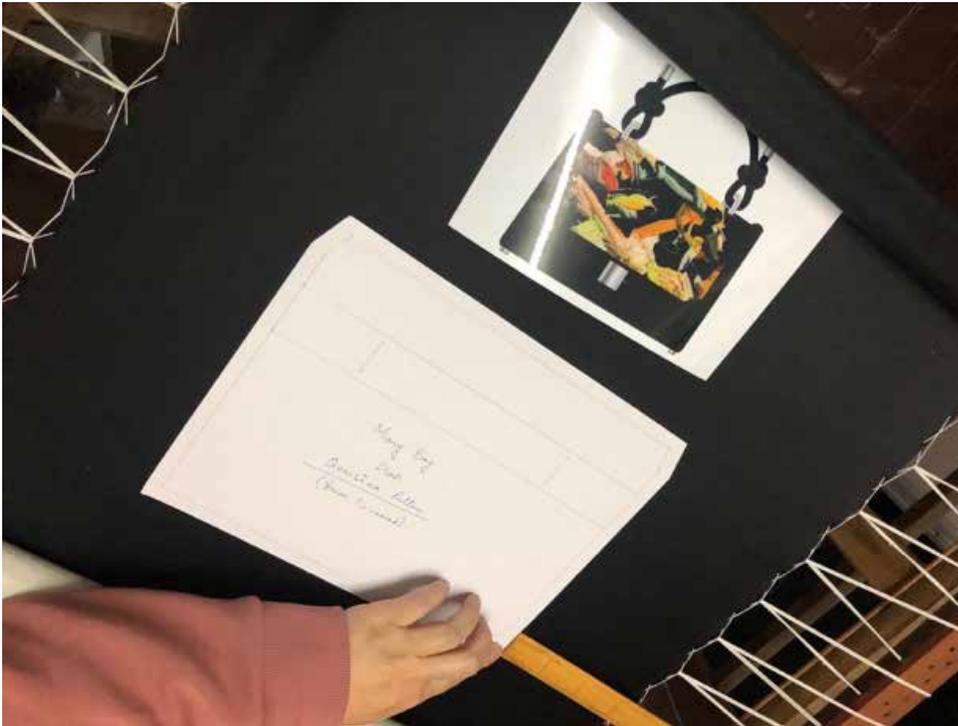


## INTERVENTION

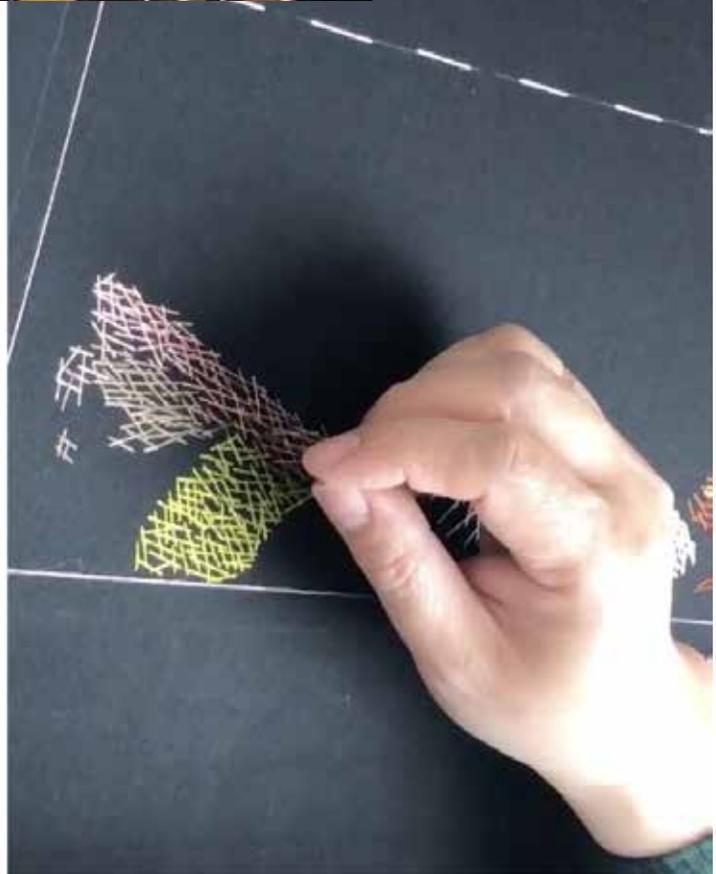
I went back to China and helped the artists starting from setting up the work station, picking threads, print design draft, and clarify sizing requirements. In emails and text messages, together with the artists, I simultaneously touch-based and updated the progress with the brand, discuss small details, exchange opinions, and negotiate for iterations.

During the entire process, I made sure that both parties are taken into account and work collaboratively in a peaceful environment. Through video talk, I also organized a non-violent communication space for the brand representative and the artist group, in sensitive topics such as payment and reimbursements, they are open, honest and transparent about their different situations and give clear thoughts to specific questions.





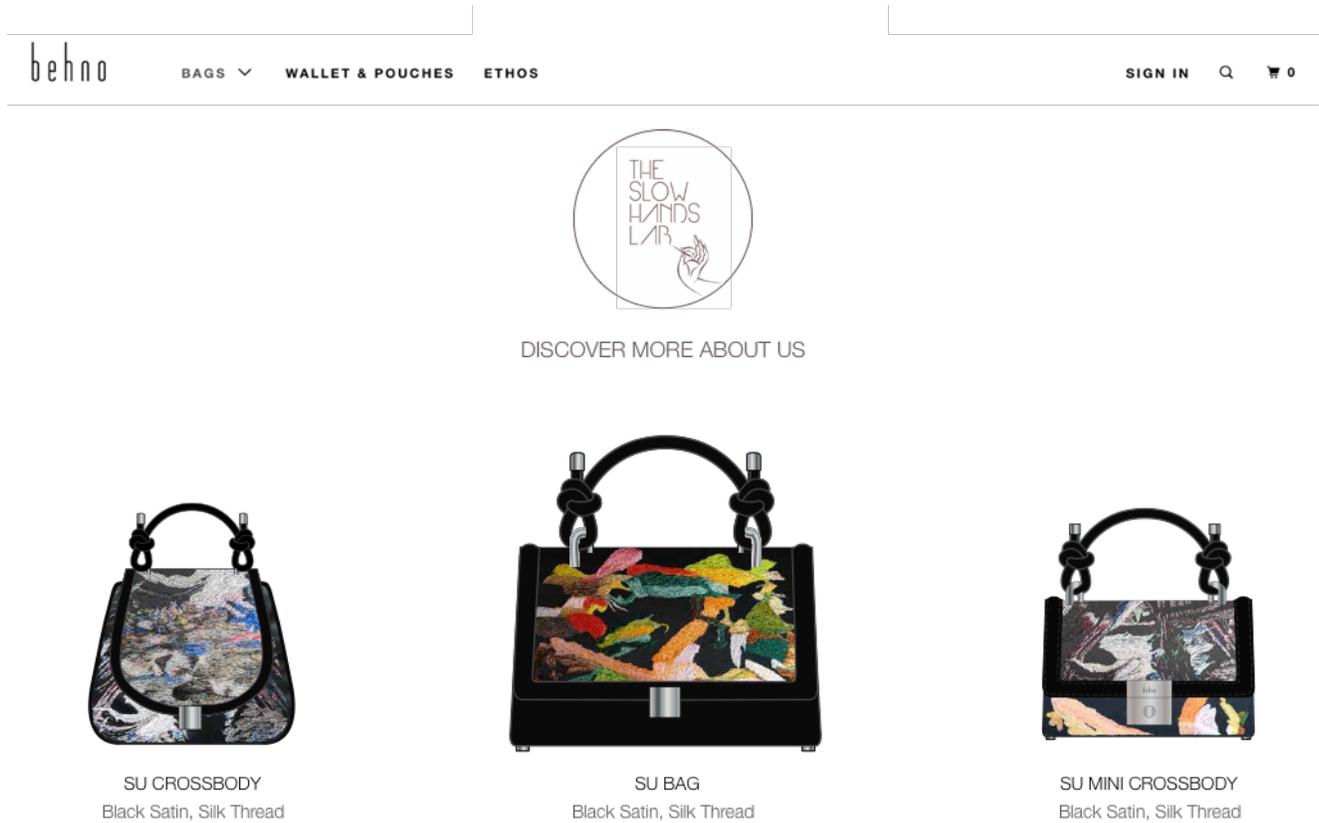
After 15 days, 120 hours, including few iterations, the artists finished the embroidery and sent it to the factory for bag making. After seeing the picture of embroidery, the brand was shock and touch by the fantastic job the artists have done. The head designer says, " It's so beautiful and exceed my expectations to a great extent. I can't wait to see the bags." Xu, the artist who made the embroidery responded," I'm so happy with it. Wait until you see the real embroidery, it definitely looks better than it on a picture ."



**INTERVENTION**



# INTERVENTION



After the bags were finished, I created a page for the collection to launch on behno's official website, featuring my project name, which allows potential customers to learn about the creators of the embroideries, the artist's group.

## INTERVENTION



behno

The embroidery art laying on your beloved handbag is called Su embroidery, which is one of Chinese intangible heritage that lasts for over 2000 years.

Collaborating with a female artists' group located in Suzhou, China, where Su embroidery was born, The Slow Hand's Lab and behno want to bring you the most authentic "when tradition meets modern" look.

To discover more please visit [theslowhandslab.com](http://theslowhandslab.com).

I created special info tag that will be placed inside the bag, which briefly introduces the collaboration, Su embroidery and Su embroidery artist to the customers; the tag also functions as a name card, from which the artists are directly connected to and can be contacted by customers.

## INTERVENTION



- ABOUT US
- STORY
- ARTWORKS
- CONTACT US

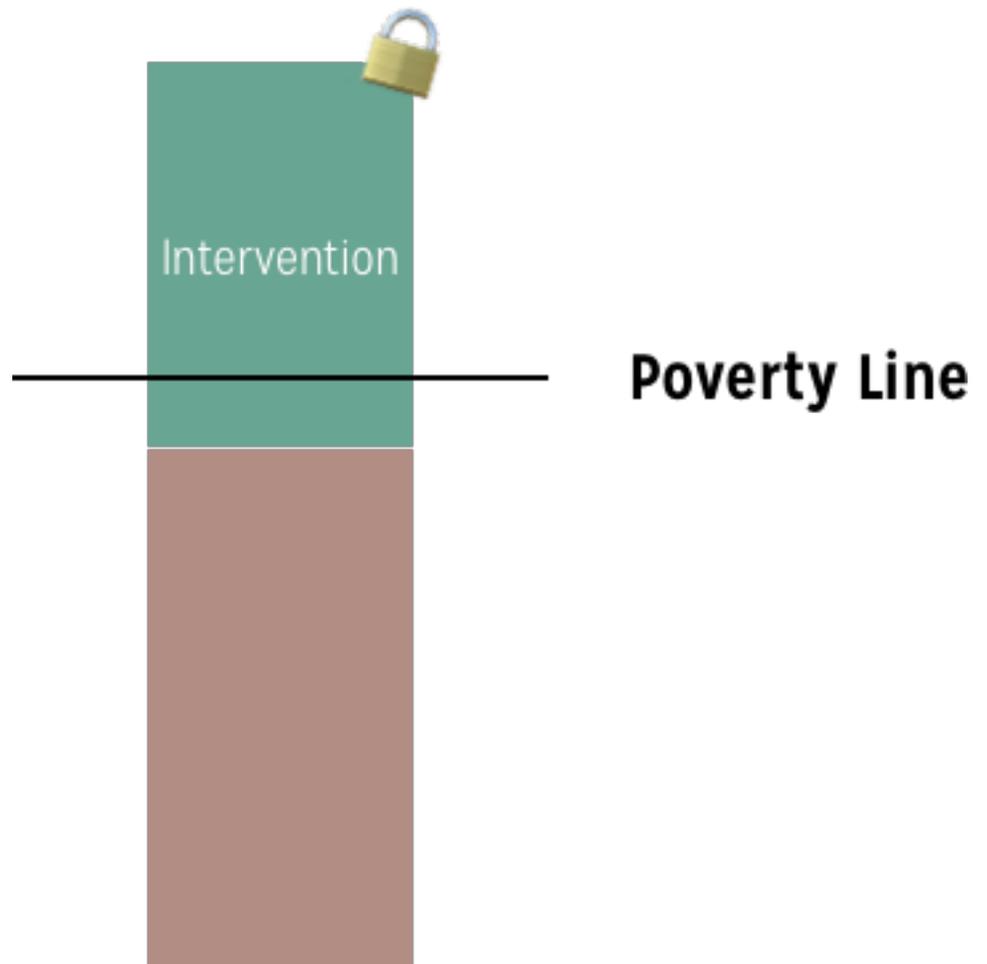


I also created a subwebsite under behno's official website, where the online visitors and potential customers can have the opportunity to learn more about Su embroidery art's history and artists's stories.

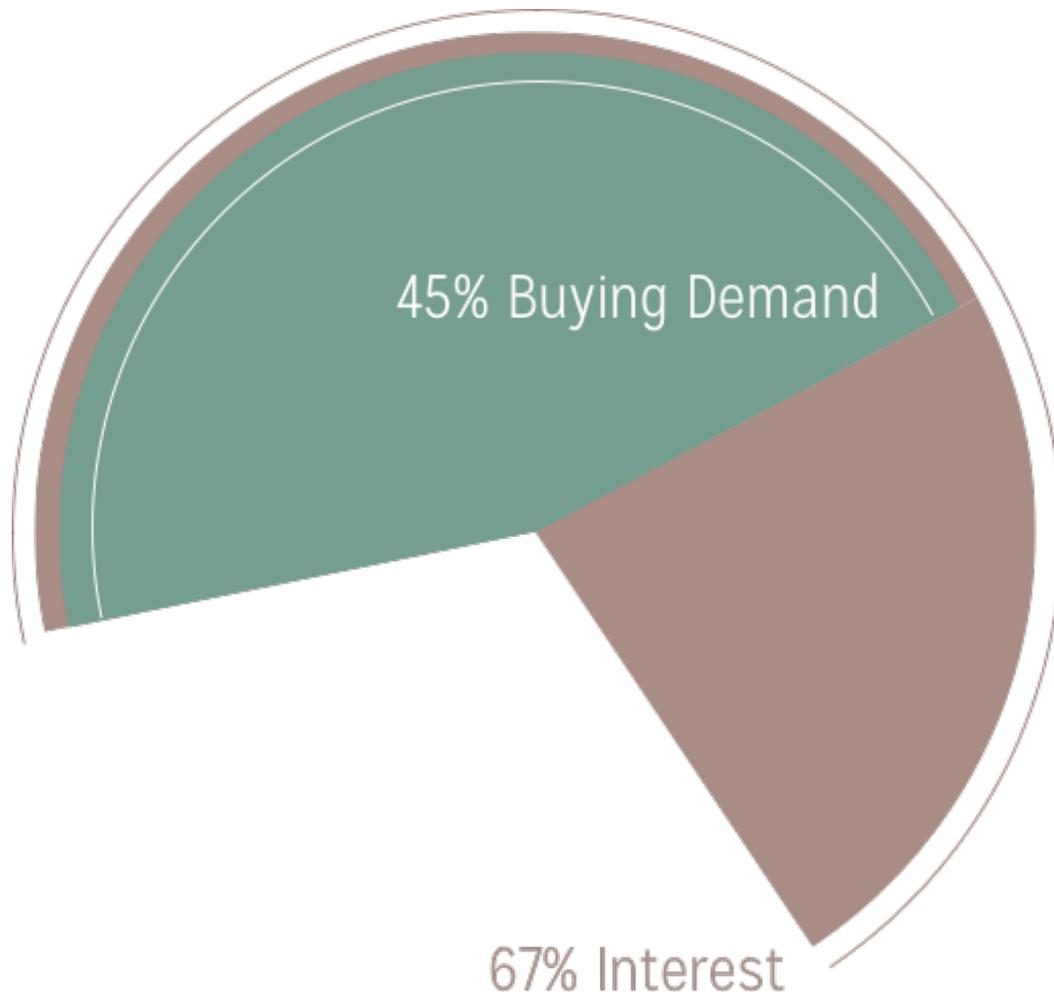
## RESULTS

**80%**  
of monthly income  
is secured

After this collaboration, using half month, the artists are able to secure 80% of their monthly income, which lifts them up from the poverty thresholds.



## RESULTS



After seeing the embroidered bags, 67% of my test group are showing their interest, while 45% have buying demand.

## RESULTS

**+20**  
orders

After seeing the final look of the embroidery, behno, the brand we did collaboration with confirmed 20 more orders of the collections, which potentially secures another 20 month of income for the Su embroidery artists.

**+5**  
fashion blogs

Five fashion bloggers decided to write about this collaborations and share the artists' story once we launch the products on the market. We are also confirming if Vogue China and other US magazines will feature our stories in the next months.

**+2**  
pop-up events

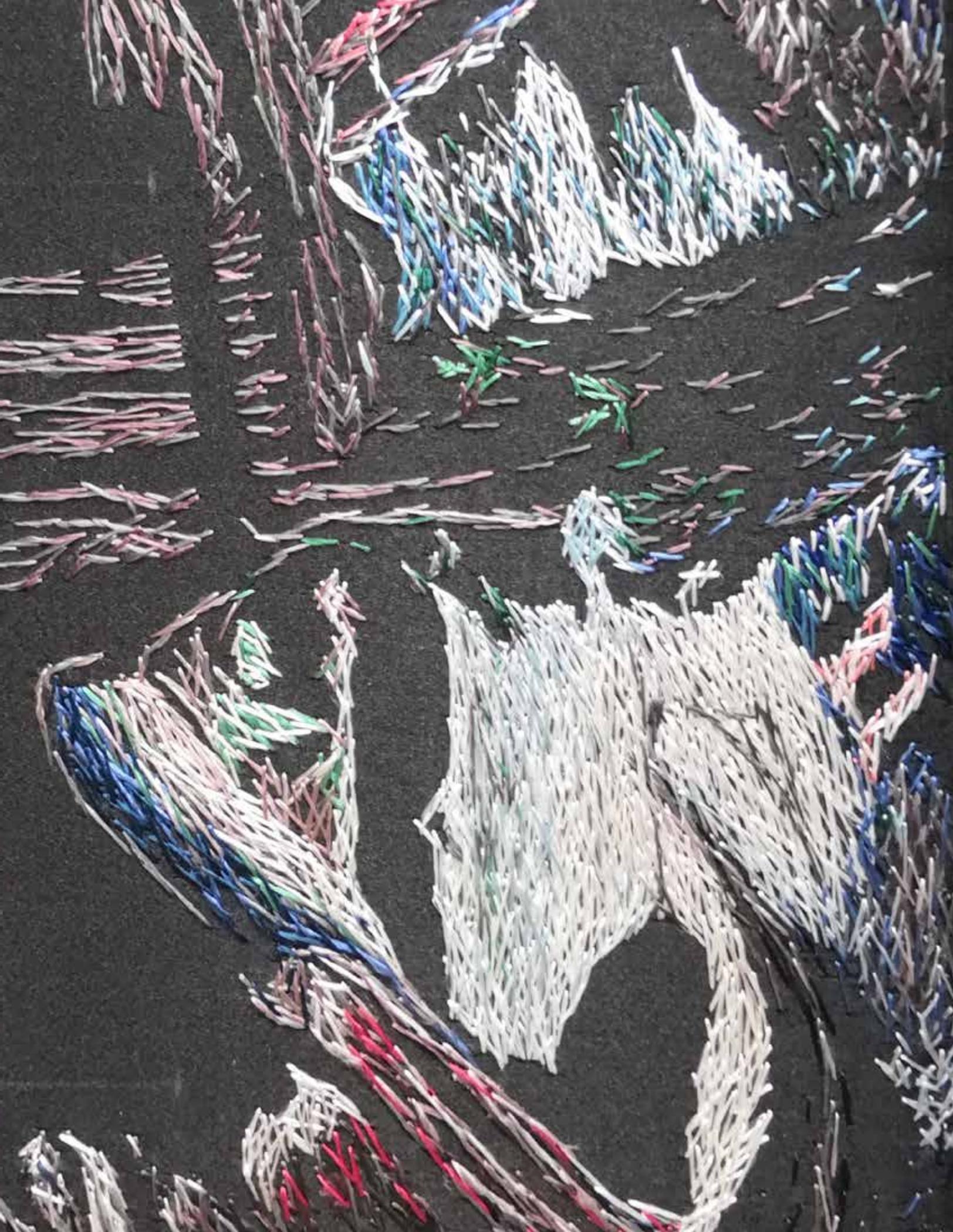
Two New York located pop-up events for this collection is also under conversations.

## RESULTS

100% positive feedback was collected from the artist group. Among different comments from them, the following words touched me the most:

*"As an embroidery artist, needle is my pen, and thread is my pigment. Looking back on my career of 30 years, this project is a special moment which has stirred my passion again. I feel stronger. I feel valued."*

Xu  
Professional Su embroidery artist  
participated in the collaboration



# LEARNINGS

### #1 100% Engagement:

When doing research and interviewing people, I found it useful to fully stand on the stakeholders' side, think for them, and forget that it's for a project, but to save somebody's life. The attitude makes me respect people's opinion, be mindful of everything I hear and everything action I take, and avoid adding my own assumption.

### #2 Get Out of The Room:

There were hard times when I don't know what the next step is and got lost in my mind. It's helpful to get out of the room, observe the city, and talk to people. Leave yourself a second stop thinking about what to do, instead, look at people and see what they are doing.

### #3 For Real:

During the prototype and intervention step, I was aware of: what's the purpose? Why am I doing this? Does it work towards the goal? We are connecting to the real world, and everything we do does have an impact. We need a practical solution that works, not a beautiful one that doesn't.

**LOOKING FORWARD**

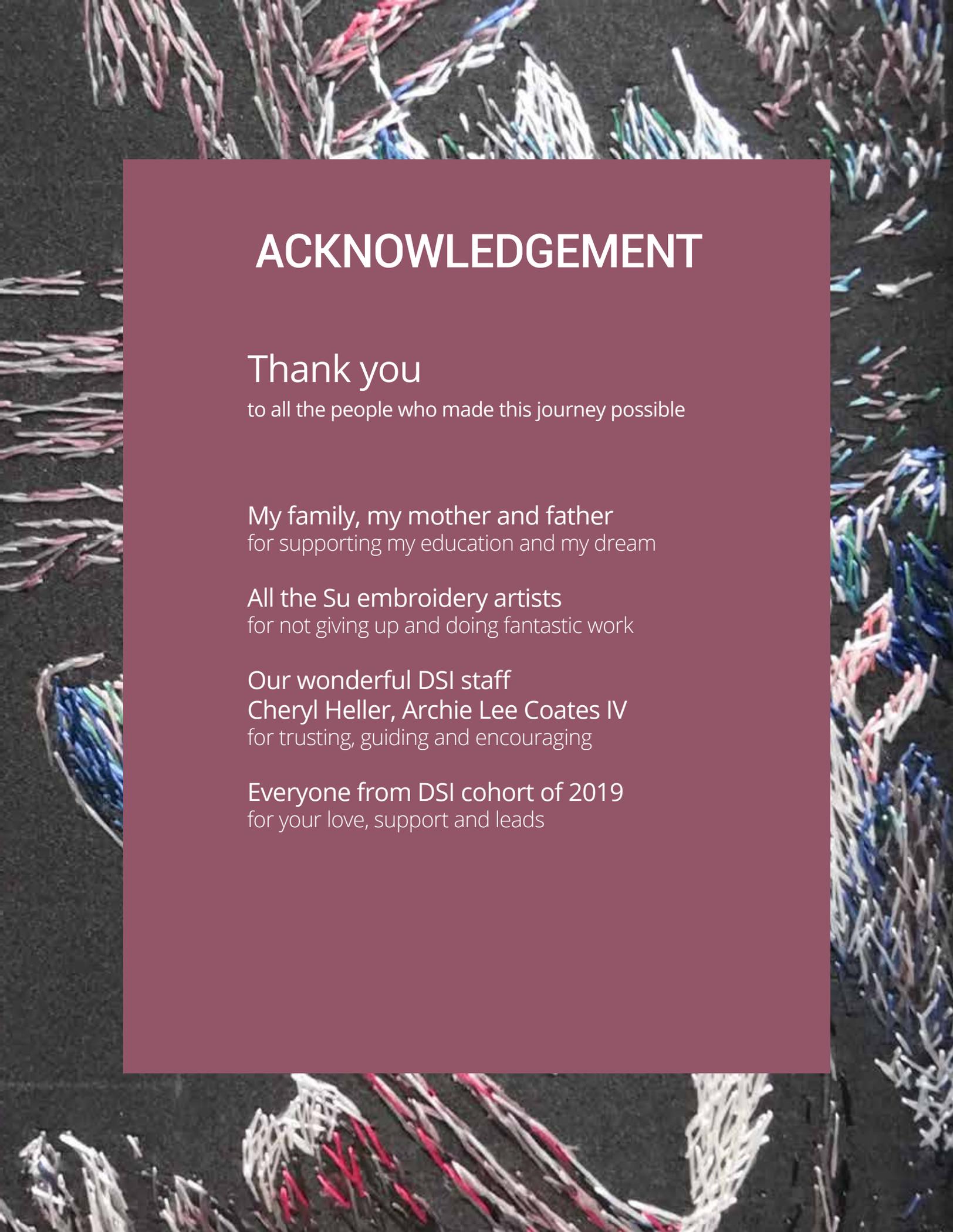
## LOOKING FORWARD

Looking forward, I acknowledge that It's helpful for the Su embroidery artist to have a bigger platform open to the public. So my next step is to launch a new website both in Chinese and English with language translation services.

As a result, the embroidery artists can update their artworks and activities, they can also interact with potential customers and partners without language barriers, and tell their stories with Su embroidery art in their own way. Therefore, the artists' connection with the modern market can be sustainably maintained and developed.

Hopefully, as the economic opportunities continuously increased for the Su embroidery artists, and as an expanded interested group from the mainstream public are learning more about the artists and Su embroidery art as a part of Chinese intangible heritage, more people from the younger generations will take the initiative to learn and inherit this traditional technique. It is possible that start from us, new blood in Su embroidery art industry can continue to make this art style more fabulous and stronger.

Not only Su embroidery is at risk of loss, but there are more traditional art and techniques are endangered in China. Using The Slow hands' Lab as a platform, I would like to help other artists and craftsmen in saving their livelihoods and their unique techniques as parts of Chinese culture.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

## Thank you

to all the people who made this journey possible

**My family, my mother and father**  
for supporting my education and my dream

**All the Su embroidery artists**  
for not giving up and doing fantastic work

**Our wonderful DSI staff**  
**Cheryl Heller, Archie Lee Coates IV**  
for trusting, guiding and encouraging

**Everyone from DSI cohort of 2019**  
for your love, support and leads



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