

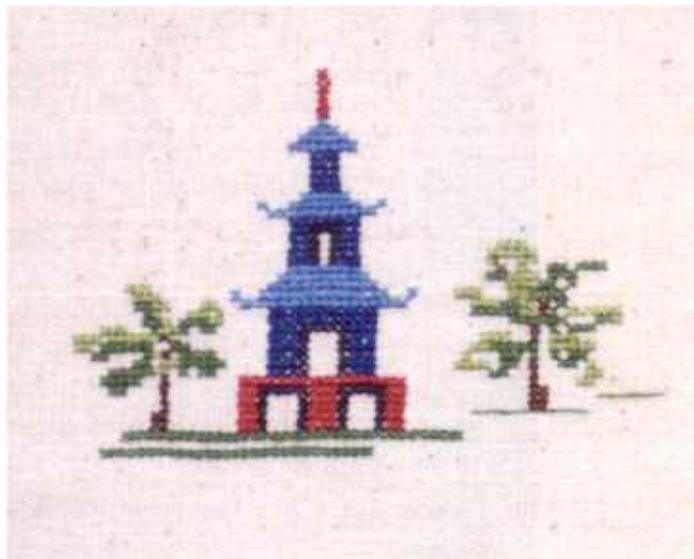
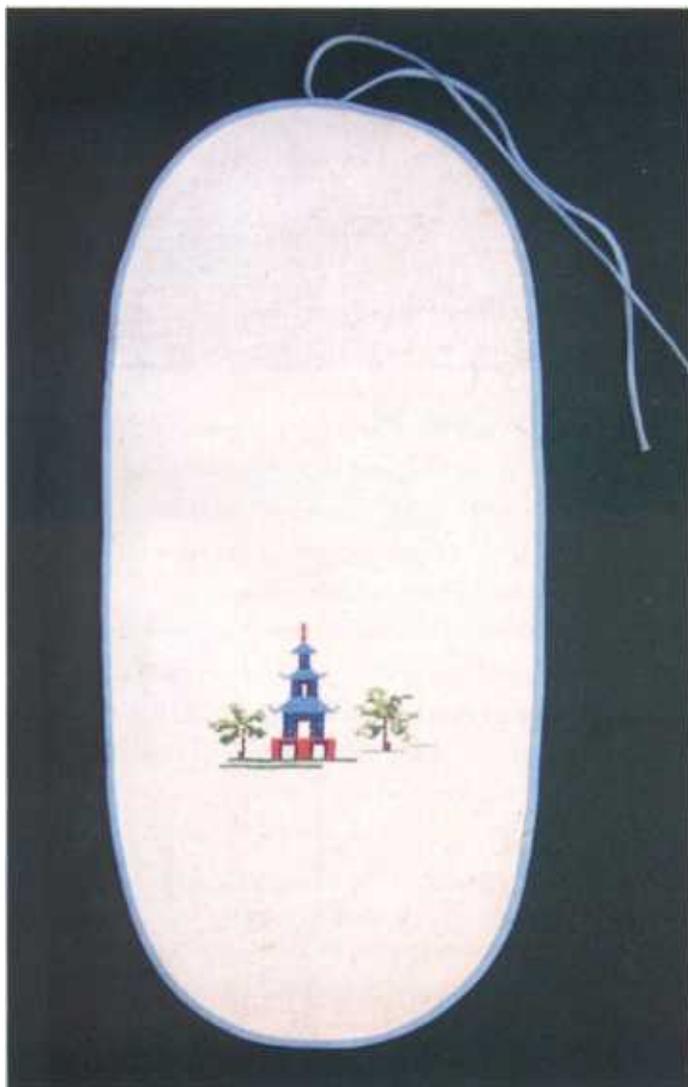
# Missionary Textiles

Made *for* Export

VALERY GARRETT

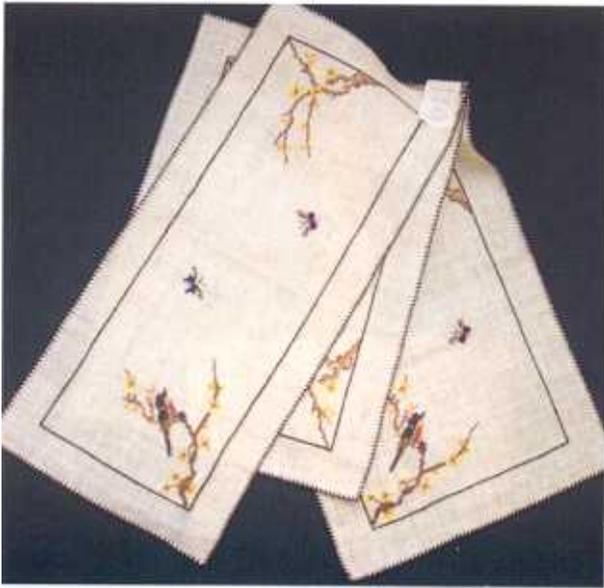


TUCKED AWAY IN THE CORNER of a small booth in a dusty Shanghai market, the bundle of embroidered household linens had lain undisturbed for decades. Labeled and priced for the American market, the package of shoe bags, handkerchief cases, table mats, tray cloths, and napkins must have been ready for the long sea journey when fate and history intervened. The little paper labels state that members of the Shaoxing (then spelled Shaohsing) Industrial Mission, Zhejiang Province, China, made the textiles. From Shaoxing, a city about 30 miles (48 km) southeast of Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang, the textiles would have been sent, via Hangzhou, to Shanghai for shipping to the United States.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Detail of the shoe bag. Shoe bag showing buildings surrounded by willow trees. Cotton thread on unbleached hemp with cotton binding. Bag, 14 x 7 inches (35.6 x 17.8 cm); handle 11 x ½ inches (27.9 x 1.3 cm). Detail of shoe bag. Shoe bag showing a pagoda and trees. Cotton thread on cotton. 15½ x 7½ inches (39.4 x 19.1 cm).

*All objects in the collection of and photographs by the author; all objects made by members of the Shaoxing Industrial Mission, Zhejiang Province, China; cross-stitched; circa 1930s.*



Buffet set showing butterflies, a bird, and peach blossoms. Cotton thread on unbleached hemp. Large, 6½ × 15 inches (16.5 × 38.1 cm); small, 8 × 12 inches (20.3 × 30.5 cm). Detail of buffet set with paper label: "Shaohsing Industrial Mission, Che. Province, China, 204Z Made in China"; in pencil on reverse: "Buffet set."

By 1934, according to missionary records, there were twenty-six mission centers in Zhejiang Province. Protestant missionaries had arrived in Formosa (present-day Taiwan) as early as 1627, but the Manchu rulers of China, founders of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), later prohibited the preaching of Christianity. Canton, the only port open to the West in the eighteenth century, became the door through which the missionaries gained a foothold in China; there they practiced medicine or worked as interpreters for Western traders. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, as China began to open its doors to the rest of the world, missionaries moved into other areas of the country and opened churches and established schools, hospitals, and clinics in cities, towns, and villages.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty, warlords governed the country in the 1920s and 1930s; civil war raged, and people suffered greatly. The missionaries responded by setting up cooperatives in which women and girls could earn a living embroidering bed linens, tablecloths, table mats, tray cloths, napkins, handkerchief cases, and shoe bags for export to the West.

The embroidered household linens done at Shaoxing probably date from the 1930s. The embroidery is very fine cross-stitch (worked on Chinese fabrics with DMC cotton threads imported from France) and depicts scenes common in China in the early twentieth century: sedan

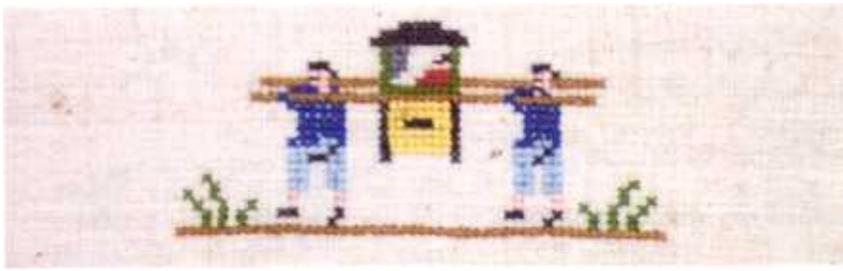
chairs carried by two bearers, rickshas, workers pumping water for irrigation, and farmers carrying produce in baskets suspended from poles across their shoulders. None of these images ever would have appeared on textiles intended for personal use by the Chinese, and none of the textiles bears the symbols believed to bring good fortune and protect from evil that typically decorated clothing and household textiles used by the Chinese. Perhaps the missionaries felt that scenes of daily life would have more appeal in the West than designs favored by the Chinese themselves.

Missionaries continued to operate embroidery cooperatives until the Communist takeover in 1949 and their subsequent expulsion from China. So, from a chance discovery in a Shanghai market, these charming linens finally make it to America. ❖

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR.** *Longtime Hong Kong resident Valery Garrett is the author of seven books and numerous articles on Chinese traditional dress and embroidery. She has served as a consultant on Chinese costume for museums around the world.*

#### FURTHER READING

Garrett, Valery. *A Collector's Guide to Chinese Dress Accessories*. 1997. Reprint, Singapore: Times Editions, 2004.



## Charts for Stitching

Use the charted designs on page 46 taken from two of the Shaoxing linens to decorate a guest towel, brighten up a pair of shoe bags, or to embellish a set of tray cloths and napkins.

—V. G.

*Charts may be photocopied for personal use.*

Detail of shoe bag showing a sedan chair and bearers, cotton thread on cotton; detail of tray cloth showing willow trees and a house, cotton thread on cotton.



Handkerchief cases showing a bridge and willow tree (top left), ricksha (top right), lanterns (bottom left), and pagoda (bottom right). Cotton thread on unbleached hemp. Each  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 9$  inches (16.5 x 22.9 cm), excluding handles.