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Revitalizing Yi Clothing Culture: A Review of Participatory Design and Cultural Sustainability in Wuding County, China

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Abstract

Background and Aims: China, as a multi-ethnic nation, attaches great significance to preserving cultural traditions across its 56 ethnic groups. Yi clothing, a crucial cultural symbol of the Yi people, carries historical memory and cultural identity through its craftsmanship and symbolic patterns. However, modernization and commercialization have created a survival crisis for Yi clothing, particularly in Wuding County, where traditional practices face threats of extinction. The study aims to examine the challenges facing Yi clothing culture in Wuding County and to propose a participatory, community-driven approach that supports cultural sustainability. It seeks to explore how participatory design can empower local communities and create a balance between cultural heritage preservation and economic development.

Methodology: This research is framed within Sustainable Heritage Theory and employs a case study approach. It synthesizes existing literature on Yi clothing culture, symbolism, and historical evolution while analyzing how participatory design (PD) and community involvement can be integrated into cultural revival models.

Results: Findings highlight the contradictions in the industrialized production of Yi clothing, where commercialization detaches cultural symbols from their context and reduces craftsmanship to factory assembly lines. The review underscores the value of participatory design in reconnecting cultural practices with their communities. Comparative case studies from China and other countries demonstrate that community empowerment can effectively sustain cultural traditions while creating economic opportunities.

Conclusion: The study concludes that revitalizing Yi clothing culture requires a sustainable "economy–culture–subject" model that integrates cultural authenticity with economic development. Participatory design enables community ownership, strengthens cultural identity, and fosters intergenerational transmission of heritage. Although limited by its reliance on secondary literature, the research emphasizes the need for future fieldwork to directly engage with the Yi community for empirical validation.

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Keywords: Yi Clothing Culture; Sustainable Heritage Theory; Participatory Design; Cultural Sustainability; Community Involvement

Introduction

As a multi-civilization country with 56 ethnic groups, the protection and inheritance of each ethnic culture in China holds strategic national significance. Among these, Yi clothing, as an essential carrier of traditional Yi culture, encapsulates the historical memory and cultural identity of the ethnic group through its pattern symbol system, color philosophy, and craftsmanship. It is often referred to as the "epic worn on the body." Taking the Yi people of Chuxiong as an example, despite the government's significant economic achievements through supporting the embroidery industry—where the annual output value exceeded 200 million RMB in 2021(China Daily, 2021)—the increased wearing rate of traditional clothing during festivals reflects a revival of cultural identity. Despite significant efforts to protect and revive Chuxiong Yi clothing culture, traditional attire is actively worn during festivals, celebrations, and weddings, fostering cultural pride and tourism (Wang et al., 2024). However, modernization and urbanization threaten its survival, with some clothing patterns on the verge of extinction, necessitating enhanced conservation by the Chuxiong Prefecture government since 2012 (Yunnan Exploration, 2025). Fieldwork and conceptual distinctions will enhance empirical and theoretical rigor. The current development model presents a fundamental contradiction: the capital-driven industrialization overly focuses on short-term economic gains, leading to a severe imbalance in the rights to cultural development and profit distribution (Cen, 2021). This "cultural extraction" type of development, while generating commercial value, detaches pattern symbols from their original context, reduces craftsmanship to assembly-line production in factories, and, more critically, marginalizes the Yi people—who are the holders of this culture—from decision-making processes. The community's collective interests are sidelined, and traditional clothing is transformed from a "living cultural body" into a "cultural commodity." Especially in core areas of intangible cultural heritage, such as Wuding County, the migration of youth due to economic pressure exacerbates the disruption of cultural transmission, while the mass production of simplified patterns severs the semantic continuity of cultural genes like the eagle totem and the three-colored cosmic worldview. Therefore, this study focuses on the survival crisis of Yi clothing in Wuding County, deconstructing its cultural value system, diagnosing the mechanisms of transmission chain disruption, and exploring a cultural revival path centered on community participation. The aim is to reconstruct a sustainable development model that integrates "economy-culture-subject" and truly achieves the collaborative coexistence of cultural wisdom inheritance and community development rights.

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Figure 1 Yi clothing in Chuxiong

Source : (Photos taken by Author in Chuxiong Museum,2023)

Objectives

The study aims to examine the challenges facing Yi clothing culture in Wuding County and to propose a participatory, community-driven approach that supports cultural sustainability. It seeks to explore how participatory design can empower local communities and create a balance between cultural heritage preservation and economic development.

Yi Clothing Culture: History, Symbolism, and Challenges

The Yi people of Wuding County, located in Chuxiong Prefecture, have a distinct and rich clothing culture that is deeply intertwined with their historical, cultural, and environmental context. Yi clothing, like other traditional Chinese attire, such as the Hanfu, is rich in symbolism and cultural significance. They both reflect the wearer's identity and ethnic heritage. While both Yi and Hanfu styles showcase intricate embroidery and natural materials, Yi clothing is more

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colorful and has distinctive regional motifs. In contrast, Thai traditional clothing, like the Chut Thai, emphasizes silk and elaborate patterns, with a strong influence from royal court attire (K. Thepboriruk, 2020). However, overall, the Yi people view their clothing as a symbol of national pride and cultural identity, just as Thai people view the Chut Thai. This section explores the historical evolution, symbolism, and current challenges facing Yi clothing culture, particularly in the context of modern transmission and the pressures of commercialization.

Based on confirmed public information, the origins of Yi traditional clothing date back to the late Neolithic period, specifically to around 2000 BCE. According to the archaeological sites of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 9CE) in Jinning of Yunnan, we can see people with a topknot, a felt cloak, and earrings, which are very similar to the Liangshan Yi man nowadays. Besides, the painting of the 4th century CE in the tomb of Huo Chensi in the Eastern Jin Dynasty also shows us that the distinct style of Yi clothing is well-kept for more than 1600 years (National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

The original materials for early Yi clothing were leaves, grass, animal skins, and firegrass. Later, the clothing materials gradually changed to wool, linen, and then cotton, silk, and even synthetic fabrics (Zhong & Zhou, 2006). When people of the Ming and Qing Dynasties wore more decorated Yi clothing, it was because they had been influenced by Han culture. Especially when people of Han migrated into the Yi areas, the Yi clothing became more decorated and colorful, which could also be seen in the modern Yi clothing of Wuding County (Yang, 2017).

In addition, different regions also developed different Yi clothing. For example, the Nasu and Naisu were the specific branches of the Yi people. Because they had different social statuses and cultures, their Yi clothing developed differently. The Nasu branch was originally regarded as the aristocracy of the Yi, and black was regarded as their symbol of nobility, which could be seen in their modern Yi clothing. The Naisu branch was famous for its colorful decorations and embroidery, and their modern Yi clothing also reflected their social status. For example, they used rhododendron to symbolize their worship of nature.

Yi clothing is a kind of cultural object with connotation. The embroidery and clothing reflect the Yi people’s beliefs, social relationship, and their relationship with nature. The most prominent part of Yi clothing is the headdress. Different headdresses indicate Yi women’s age, whether married or not, and their social status as well. The Rooster Hat is worn by young women. In the eyes of the Yi people, the Rooster Hat is not only a piece of clothing but also a symbol of good luck and protection. It reflects the Yi people’s belief that animals are full of spiritual power (Zhong & Zhou, 2006). The rooster comb is designed in a shape that represents warding off evil spirits. Besides headwear, the "tail ornament" is another significant cultural feature of Yi clothing. This decorative element is often seen in the form of embroidered aprons or belts. It reflects ancient

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totemic worship, particularly the reverence for the tiger. In addition, the Yi people would see the tiger as a sacred animal and symbol of strength and protection, which is evident in their clothing, according to studies by Zhong & Zhou (2006). Finally, the totemic connection is reinforced by the "Four Directions Eight Tigers" embroidery found on the clothing of the Nasu branch, which embodies their cosmological views and their connection to the universe and the tiger totem.

To sum it up, while Wuding Yi clothing culture has deep roots, it's now facing major challenges. Research from the past decade shows that modernization and commercialization have led to the mass production of traditional designs and materials for profit. This has diluted the cultural significance of the clothing, as many patterns and techniques are simplified in factory settings, losing their original charm (Shao, 2016). What's worse, young people moving to cities for work have broken the chain of cultural transmission. The number of government-recognized cultural inheritors in Wuding County is dwindling; the remaining experts are aging and lack the resources to teach younger generations (Li et al., 2022). With no formal educational programs to teach this culture, young people are increasingly disconnected from their heritage.

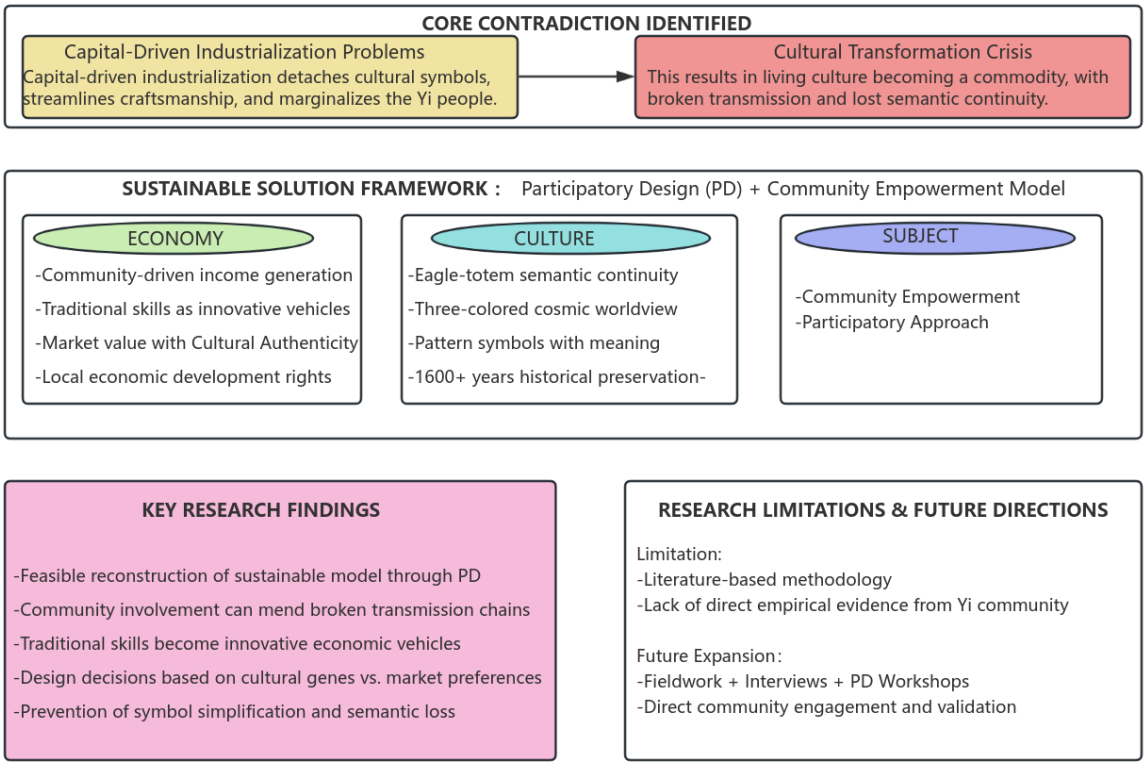


Figure 2 Research Framework

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Participatory Design and Its Role in Cultural Sustainability

Next up is a crucial concept: Participatory Design (PD). This methodology stems from Participatory Action Research (PAR), which emphasizes collaboration between scholars and community members to co-create knowledge and address social issues (Cornish & Breton, 2023). The key difference lies in their primary focus. PAR prioritizes direct experience and aims for transformative processes, concentrating on collaboration through dialogue to empower communities to solve their problems (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007). The outcomes of PAR include generating local knowledge, actionable solutions, and strengthening community capacity to drive social change (Cornish & Breton, 2023). PD, on the other hand, evolved from the community movements of the 1960s, where designers worked closely with marginalized groups to develop systems that would improve their lives (Sanoff, 2006). It integrates methods like ethnographic observation and interviews, engaging both designers and users in collaboratively shaping design artifacts (Spinuzzi, 2005). Ultimately, PD gives people a voice in technological and social innovations, making it a powerful tool for preserving cultural heritage (Smith & Iversen, 2018).

The Role of Community in Cultural Sustainability

Community involvement is central to cultural sustainability, as it is the community's connection to their heritage that sustains cultural heritage. Community involvement is central to cultural sustainability, as it is the community's connection to their heritage that sustains cultural heritage. In this case, participatory design enables local communities in the Yi clothing culture in Wuding to be in charge of their cultural heritage project to preserve their traditions. According to the living heritage approach, the community is the most important actor in the process of preservation and the tangible and intangible cultural heritage preserved in the face of cultural space (Poulios, 2014).

Integrating Participatory Design with Yi Clothing Culture

Integrating participatory design and Yi clothing culture opens up a culturally sensitive approach to revitalize traditional clothing in Wuding. When the community participates in the design process, a product created by the community for the community, based on their own culture, but that fits in the modern or traditional culture, is developed. This involvement makes Yi clothing a living culture, connects the past and the present, and promotes economic and cultural sustainability. Design and culture are integrated for relevance and innovation, and the community takes ownership of its cultural heritage (Chen & Suwanthada, 2024).

Integrating Participatory Design (PD) with Yi clothing culture not only provides a pathway for revitalizing traditional attire but also aligns with the principles of Sustainable Heritage Theory

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(SHT). Sustainable Heritage Theory emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to heritage preservation that incorporates both tangible and intangible cultural elements, ensuring their continuity while adapting to contemporary needs (Meireis & Rippl, 2018; Chagovets,2024). In the case of Wuding Yi clothing, participatory design fosters a dynamic interaction between the community and the cultural symbols embedded in the attire, ensuring that traditional practices are passed down while being integrated into modern contexts. This process mirrors the core tenets of SHT, which advocates for the active involvement of local communities in preserving their heritage. By embedding cultural knowledge within design practices, the community's collective identity and traditional skills are not only maintained but also enhanced through innovation, reflecting a sustainable fusion of heritage with economic growth (Cui & Buchaka, 2024; Wang et al., 2025). Thus, the integration of PD with Yi clothing culture is an embodiment of Sustainable Heritage Theory to ensure the sustainability of cultural practices while promoting community empowerment and economic viability.

Case Studies Supporting the Role of Community in Cultural Sustainability

The following case studies were selected to illustrate the successful integration of traditional attire with modern design and tourism strategies. Also, they highlight the role of community participation in cultural preservation and demonstrate how participatory design can revitalize ethnic clothing.

Case Study 1: Qiang Clothing Culture in Sichuan, China

Let's start close to home for the Yi, in Sichuan, China, where the Qiang people are working hard to keep their traditional clothing culture alive. Researchers Chen and Suwanthada (2024) dove into how participatory design can protect this rich heritage. By involving the Qiang community directly in the design process, alongside designers and government officials, they created tourism products that honor both the past and the present. These aren't just souvenirs; they're bridges between tradition and modernity, ensuring that Qiang culture thrives while boosting the local economy. This story is a powerful example for the Yi in Wuding County, showing how community involvement can preserve the intricate patterns and cultural significance of ethnic clothing while making it relevant today.

Case Study 2: Indigenous Heritage Preservation in Taiwan

Now, let's head to Taiwan, where Indigenous communities are breathing new life into their heritage through their efforts. Yeh, Lin, and Lai (2021) explored how these communities are deeply involved in keeping their traditions alive. Through activities like weaving and the Ramie Festival, they're not just preserving their culture—they're making it a source of pride and economic opportunity. By turning traditional practices like weaving into attractions for tourists and local

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businesses, they're showing that cultural heritage can be both a treasure from the past and a key to a prosperous future. For the Yi, this suggests that activities like embroidery workshops or cultural festivals could help sustain their clothing culture.

Case Study 3: Fashion Activism in Waltham Forest, London

Next, let's cross over to London, specifically Waltham Forest, where fashion is being used as a tool for activism and cultural reconnection. Mazzarella (2023) tells us about workshops where women come together to make clothes, not just for fashion's sake, but to reconnect with their roots and local history. Through these hands-on activities, participants gain new skills, feel empowered, and strengthen their sense of community. The project addressed local issues like skills shortages and unemployment, showing how fashion can be a catalyst for both cultural preservation and social change. It's a beautiful example of how creativity can foster personal growth and cultural pride. For the Yi, this could inspire community-led workshops where artisans teach traditional embroidery techniques, empowering locals while keeping their heritage alive, potentially countering the marginalization of cultural bearers noted in your study.

Case Study 4: The Revitalization of Maori Culture in Aotearoa, New Zealand

Let's travel to New Zealand, where the Maori people are revitalizing their culture through participatory design. Marques, Grabasch, & McIntosh (2021) studied how the Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa tribe is using this approach to preserve their identity by managing their land in a way that's both sustainable and deeply rooted in their traditions. By involving the community in decisions about their ancestral land, they're ensuring that their cultural values are at the forefront of modern conservation efforts. While not directly about clothing, this case shows how community involvement can sustain broader cultural practices, offering lessons for the Yi in integrating their clothing culture with broader community goals, such as sustainable development or cultural education.

Case Study 5: Uyghur Cultural Heritage Preservation in Norway

Lastly, let's look at how the Uyghur community in Norway is keeping its cultural heritage alive, even far from its homeland. Salvesen and Keitsch (2021) explored how participatory design is helping them maintain their traditions. By involving community members in the development of design concepts, such as a cookbook that represented Uyghur culture, the study demonstrated how community-driven cultural projects can promote cultural preservation, identity, and social sustainability in a diaspora setting. This shows that no matter where you are, community involvement can sustain cultural ties and build a sense of belonging. For the Yi, this could be relevant if there are diaspora communities or if they want to share their clothing culture globally through cultural projects, ensuring their heritage remains vibrant.

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The following table shows a comparative analysis of the versatility of community involvement, which offers insights for revitalizing Yi Clothing Culture.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis

Case Study	Case Location	Outcome	Relevance to Yi
Qiang Clothing Culture	Sichuan, China	Culturally authentic tourism products	Direct model for Yi clothing preservation through tourism
Fashion Activism	Waltham Forest, UK	Skills development, cultural pride	Inspiration for Yi artisan workshops
Indigenous Heritage Preservation	Taiwan, China	Cultural capital for tourism, economic growth	Model for Yi festivals and tourism
Maori Culture Revitalization	New Zealand	Cultural identity preservation, sustainability	Broader cultural integration strategies
Uyghur Cultural Heritage	Norway	Strengthened cultural identity in the diaspora	Ideas for the Yi diaspora or global outreach

These case studies drive home the point that community involvement is essential for cultural sustainability. By getting hands-on with their heritage, communities ensure it stays vibrant, relevant, and economically viable. This is especially timely as of July 29, 2025, with growing global interest in cultural diversity and sustainable development. For the Yi in Wuding County, these stories offer inspiration: by involving local artisans and community members, their clothing culture can remain a living testament to their identity, much like the Qiang, Taiwanese Indigenous, and others have done. These lessons are a call to action for anyone passionate about culture and sustainability, particularly in addressing the challenges of commercialization and marginalization noted in your study.

Conclusion

This study reveals a core contradiction in the industrialization of Wuding Yi clothing culture: while capital-driven commercialization has boosted economic returns, it has detached cultural symbols from their original context, reduced craftsmanship to assembly-line production, and marginalized the cultural bearers' decision-making power, transforming a "living cultural entity"

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into a "cultural commodity" (Mazzarella & Black, 2023). Reconstructing a sustainable "economy-culture-subject" model through participatory design (PD) and community empowerment is highly feasible. Community involvement can mend broken cultural transmission chains; case studies show that when communities control their cultural narrative, traditional skills can become innovative vehicles with both economic value and cultural authenticity, simultaneously strengthening younger generations' identity (Yeh, Lin, & Lai, 2021; Chen & Suwanthada, 2024). Participatory tools like Value-Attribute Mapping and Chrono-Mapping can systematically identify core heritage attributes, ensuring design decisions are based on cultural genes rather than market preferences, thus preventing symbol simplification and semantic loss (Sanoff, 2006; Smith & Iversen, 2018).

The main research limitation of this study stems from its dependence on existing literature as the main research instrument. The analysis of literature brings valuable understanding about cultural processes and theoretical frameworks in participatory design, but it lacks direct evidence from local Yi community members and their personal participatory design encounters. Future research will utilize field-based methods inside the Yi culture field to overcome this limitation. Such approaches will generate original data that validates the proposed conceptual framework while enhancing its alignment with genuine Yi community perspectives. The research fails to conduct an in-depth investigation of how knowledge passes between generations. Future studies will explore the processes of knowledge transmission while identifying obstacles like youth migration and economic pressures, which will lead to policy recommendations for mentorship programs and educational integration to protect this fundamental connection.

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