

Qiang Costumes in Maoxian, Sichuan Province: The Revival of Chinese Minority Identity for Application in Design

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Abstract: The purpose of this investigation was to fulfill three objectives: (1) to study the characteristics, connotations and reflected history and social development of Qiang costumes; (2) to study and analyze the cultural identity of Qiang Costumes for development into local products and (3) to design products inspired by Qiang Costumes in Maoxian County, Sichuan. The focus community was the Qiang people in Maoxian County, Sichuan Province, with the research population including local government workers, product sellers, design experts, and target consumers. Using a mixed-methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the researchers gathered data through surveys, interviews, observations, and questionnaires. Results show that Qiang fabrics in Maoxian County are characterized by a number of local patterns, including fire, clouds, and flowers. These are incorporated into a rich and distinctive ethnic clothing identity. The researchers designed five everyday items based on the symbolism of Qiang clothing: a keychain, tableware, a bookmark, a fridge magnet, and a phone case. A questionnaire distributed to the target group found that the general level of consumer satisfaction with the products was at a very good level ($x = 4.83$). This investigation provides invaluable insights into the interplay between cultural preservation and economic development, highlighting the crucial role of integrating traditional Qiang culture into modern product design strategies.

Keywords: design application, ethnic culture, heritage, Qiang costumes, traditional fabric.

The sartorial practices of China's numerous ethnic minority groups constitute a vital component of their distinctive cultural traditions, serving as significant vehicles for the perpetuation and evolution of their ethnic heritage (An, 2011; J. Li & Yu, 2023). These practices are, therefore, integral to the overarching tapestry of Chinese national culture, providing a lens through which to perceive the lifestyles, culture, folk customs, and religious beliefs spanning different historical eras and geographical landscapes (Chew, 2007; Grose, 2020). Manifesting in a myriad of forms, such as structures, shapes, production techniques, patterns, ornamentations, and styles of wear, the cultural implications are evident in every thread (Fu, 2023). The costume culture of the Qiang people that will be explored in this paper exemplifies this important function.

Clothes worn by the Qiang people are imbued with the unique cultural idiosyncrasies and aesthetic sensibilities inherent to their indigenous society, simultaneously reflecting cross-cultural exchanges and assimilations between the Qiang, other minority groups, and the majority Han people (Y. Zhang, 2018). The preservation and progression of Qiang dress culture

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not only ensures the perpetuity of their own culture but also underscores the vibrancy and breadth of China's multicultural heritage (Su, 2018). By dissecting the elements of Qiang costume, scholars can delve into the nuances of the Qiang's historical and cultural landscape, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding of their ethnic traits. It is hoped that this investigation will contribute to the preservation and advancement of these diverse cultures, in turn furthering international understanding of Chinese national dress culture.

Background

The Qiang are one of the major ethnic groups in southwest China, and their history can be traced back to ancient China. Local histories consider the modern Qiang to be descended from an ancient Qiang line, who was, in turn, the progeny of Emperor Yandi, the legendary ancient Chinese 'Flame Emperor' whose exploits were recorded on oracle bone inscriptions (Shelach, 1996; Shen, 2012; Y. Zhang, 2018). The ancient Qiang were considered a highly civilized tribe in ancient China, and the majority of people of the first Chinese dynasty, Xia. The formation and development of the Chinese nation consequently runs parallel to the history of the Qiang. During the Qin and Han dynasties, Qiang ancestors migrated from the northwest and settled in the upper valley of the Minjiang River, living in homes carved from the mountain rocks (Hu & Wang, 2016). Their migration broadened the distribution of Qiang people across northwest and southwest China, and the migrants created a unique ethnic culture, which is now continued by the modern Qiang people. Today, the Qiang are known as "the people on the clouds" and are dispersed mainly in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, Beichuan Qiang Autonomous County in Mianyang City, and other regions, harmoniously cohabitating with Tibetan, Han Chinese, and Hui populations (Y. Li, 2022). After the Sichuan Earthquake of 2008, Maoxian County was identified by the State Council as the core area of an experimental zone to protect Qiang culture and ecology (Q. Li, 2017; Sun, 2022)

Qiang civilization is traditionally pastoral, and they were among the first people to domesticate wild sheep. This put the Qiang people in a prime position to develop a unique brand of textiles, which they have developed and preserved to this day in the form of colorful traditional costumes (Wang, 2002). The local dress reflects the historical and cultural heritage of the Qiang and has had a profound influence on neighboring minority groups. Initially, Qiang costumes were crafted with simple geometric patterns embroidered on the collar and cuffs to distinguish tribal groups. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, folk embroidery became more popular, and embroidery styles were developed to decorate clothing, headdresses, shoe mats, waistbands, and belts (Deng, 2023). As many as 100 kinds of embroidery patterns have been identified in Qiang dress (Zhong et al., 2012). The traditional Qiang costumes are now characterized by bright colors, complex patterns, and smooth lines, often incorporating brocade, embroidery, and weaving. The ethnic beliefs and historical development are woven into the ornamentation of the costumes, conserving the cultural memory and spirit of the Qiang people. Although the population of the Qiang is small, its remarkable cultural heritage and historical legacy have made an indelible contribution to the diverse sartorial culture of China.

The devastating Wenchuan earthquake of 2008 claimed many lives, including those of cultural inheritors, thereby impeding the transmission of Qiang clothing design. In the wake of the catastrophe, the Qiang culture piqued widespread interest, prompting substantial state-backed investments into fortifying the education, training, and protection of this local culture (Xiong, 2021). Through these conservation initiatives, a new generation of cultural custodians has been nurtured and entrusted with preserving and perpetuating the essence of Qiang culture, fostering its inheritance, and facilitating sustainable development (Chen, 2012). Despite these efforts, there remains a need for product innovation to cater to evolving consumer needs and ensure the continued transmission of authentic Qiang clothing heritage. Criticisms of the state-

backed support include disguised regulation and control of ethnic communities “while highlighting state priorities in national unity, social cohesion, and poverty alleviation” (Zhu, 2020, p. 88). Analyzing local designs could yield valuable insights into the creation of new Qiang products that retain authentic links to traditional culture, particularly within Maoxian County. As academics interested in the development of fashion and sartorial practices in ethnic minority communities, the researchers were keen to study the traits, connotations, and historical and societal conditions of Qiang costumes, with the primary objective to distill the local costume identity into new product designs infused with Qiang heritage to invigorate the local creative economy and expand consumer options when purchasing Qiang products.

Literature Review

The contemporary economic landscape poses several challenges to the preservation of Qiang culture and traditional lifestyle. As the impact of the modernized economy and post-2008 restoration continues to pervade the lives of the Qiang people, their traditional products are faced with the predicament of transformation or extinction (Long et al., 2018). Increased connectivity, burgeoning commodity awareness, and evolving market concepts catalyze these changes, intensifying the dissonance between the principles of market efficiency and the skillsets, production cycles, and costs inherent to traditional Qiang product manufacture (Cohen, 1989; Wickramasinghe & Hopper, 2005). In a broad policy recommendation based on the analysis of Qiang cultural transformations since receiving support in the wake of the Wenchuan Earthquake, He and Chen (2019) recommend that local developers return to the cultural roots of Qiang identity as the basis of conservation initiatives rather than making local economic prosperity the foundation of support projects. They argue that this will ensure the protection of Qiang’s ethnic identity, which has been diluted by rapid restoration.

This is a delicate situation because government support has undoubtedly ensured the survival of Qiang communities and individuals whose lives were transformed by the devastation of 2008 (Ma & Zhao, 2019). Yet, at the same time, the traditional Qiang culture has been besieged by the dual impact of development and societal shifts. The advent of the modern market economy and the growth of tourism are transforming the lifestyle and cultural beliefs of the Qiang people (Fang et al., 2019). Such changes are exacerbated by the migration of younger generations to urban areas, resulting in the loss of traditional lifestyles and an ensuing risk of traditional production skills disappearing across generations (Abramson & Qi, 2011; Q. Li, 2017). Insufficient social guidance further compounds these issues. While efforts have been made by various entities, including the government, research institutions, and social groups, to guide the Qiang people toward cultural self-awareness, their effectiveness is inconclusive (Cheng, 2020; Han et al., 2016; Sheng-Li, 2016; Yang et al., 2008). Additionally, conceptual biases can distort the Qiang people’s understanding of the relationship between traditional culture and economic benefits, often leading to an incongruity between cultural connotations and operational practices (Yang & Wall, 2009, 2016, 2022; Yun & Zhang, 2017).

Souvenirs in ethnic minority communities, although typically representative of regional culture, are often rendered impractical due to poor packaging quality and portability (Xiong, 2021). A lack of brand identity and product information, coupled with inferior packaging, detracts from the appeal of these souvenirs and negatively affects consumer purchase behaviors. This, in turn, culminates in a decline in sales, highlighting the pressing need for better marketing strategies. Moreover, the contemporary market is characterized by product homogeneity, with souvenirs often lacking in regional uniqueness (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2021; Liang et al., 2020). The result is a monotonous market landscape that fails to intrigue visitors (Husa, 2020). Most of these souvenirs are detached from the culture of the tourist locations they are supposed to represent, often lacking in craftsmanship and cultural identity. This lack of distinctiveness

contributes to consumers' hesitation to purchase them, further exacerbating the issue of low sales. X. Zhang (2021) advocates for the integration of ethnic cultural symbols into modern visual communication design, serving to express ethnic spirit, and artistic connotation, and facilitate multicultural integration. In the context of Qiang culture, infusing such symbols into souvenir design would counteract product homogenization while enhancing cultural communication and appreciation. This method promotes the preservation and proliferation of Qiang's unique cultural heritage.

Nonetheless, there is some need for caution. Cohen (1989) presents a more complex view of the commercialization of ethnic crafts, noting that as the products are adapted to market preferences for economic gain, their cultural relevance within their communities can decrease. However, he counters the notion that such commercialization outright destroys ethnic cultures, suggesting it can instead introduce new meanings to crafts within a declining local material culture, although warning that these culturally marketed products may reshape both the external perception of the ethnic group and the internal self-identification of its members (Cohen, 2000). Gertner (2019) also presents a cautionary perspective, arguing that the development of novel designs based on traditional culture is rooted in the phenomenon of cultural appropriation, wherein a dominant culture exploits elements of a less privileged culture for its gain. In the context of the Qiang culture, this perspective underscores the risk of commercialization and commodification of their traditional symbols and crafts. While such developments could offer economic benefits, they may also inadvertently misrepresent, exploit, or trivialize Qiang's cultural heritage, leading to the potential loss of authenticity in Qiang products and a reduction in the cultural significance within the Qiang community. The researchers are conscious of this danger and will work in close collaboration with Qiang people throughout this investigation.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research techniques to develop product designs based on the sartorial culture of the Qiang people. This approach allowed for a robust and comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation, accommodating the diverse nature and scope of information sought from each group (Halcomb et al., 2023). By integrating multiple viewpoints and data sources, the research was positioned to yield richer, more nuanced insights, enhancing the validity and applicability of the findings within the field of cultural design application (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011).

The research population for this study was purposively selected to represent a diverse cross-section of individuals directly or indirectly connected to the cultural, economic, and design aspects of Qiang costumes in Maoxian County, Sichuan Province. This included the Qiang people residing in the county, local government personnel, souvenir vendors, designers, and a group of tourists from Generation Y. The rationale behind choosing these specific groups was multifold. The Qiang people, as the bearers of the cultural heritage, provided invaluable insights into the traditional aspects of their costumes, reflecting authentic practices and beliefs (Zevik, 2002). Local government personnel were included to understand the policies and support mechanisms in place for cultural preservation and local economic development. Souvenir vendors and designers offered practical perspectives on the commercialization of cultural elements and the challenges and opportunities in product development. The inclusion of Generation Y tourists, defined in this study as those born between the late 1980s and early 2000s, was based on their distinct purchasing behaviors and digital proficiency (Black, 2010; Lissitsa & Kol, 2016; Muda et al., 2016; Valentine & Powers, 2013). This demographic, known for its concern for social issues like environmental protection and diversity, represents a significant consumer base with strong consumption power and preferences for personalization

and sustainability (Dwidienawati et al., 2021). Their views were crucial in understanding how modern consumers perceive and interact with cultural products. To gather data from these varied groups, consent was sought through formal channels. The study's purpose, methodology, and ethical considerations were clearly communicated to each participant. Assurances were given regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, ensuring voluntary participation without any coercion. This approach not only adhered to ethical research standards but also fostered a trusting environment for open and honest communication. Following a comprehensive literature review of related academic texts, in-depth interviews were carried out via video call with five key informants, selected for their direct involvement or expert knowledge in areas relevant to Qiang costume culture and its commercial applications. These informants included professionals in clothing design and education, experienced local embroiderers, and souvenir merchants, each providing unique insights into different facets of Qiang costume design, cultural significance, and market dynamics. The research was conducted with strict adherence to ethical considerations, ensuring respect, fairness, and privacy for all participants (Aguinis & Henle, 2004). This involved obtaining informed consent from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained to protect participant identity and sensitive information. The researchers also conducted participant and non-participant observations and a comprehensive field survey in Maoxian County in December 2022. The aim was to capture a snapshot of the Qiang lifestyle and their sartorial practices. During the field visit, the researchers also explored the China Qiang Museum, Baishi Qiang Village, Niuwei Qiang Village, Songpinggou in Feixi, and Fengyi Town to investigate the current status of Qiang costume preservation. Simultaneously, a structured questionnaire survey was administered to a randomly sampled group of 108 domestic tourists from Generation Y, aiming to capture their consumption preferences and perceptions related to Qiang-inspired products (Appendix A) (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). Using results from interviews, observations, and a survey as part of an exploratory thesis aimed at integrating traditional cultural motifs into contemporary design, the primary researcher engaged with local Qiang designers to develop design sketches. These sketches, which included keychains, tableware, bookmarks, refrigerator magnets, and cell phone cases, were an academic exercise in applying Qiang costume culture to modern utility items. This initiative was undertaken to contribute to the preservation and innovative transformation of ethnic cultural symbols into everyday functional products. The final designs were given to three academic experts for evaluation and refinement and to identify a small selection to be developed into prototypes for further review. The experts were: (1) an associate professor from Sichuan Film and Television University who is recognized as a second-level national costume technician and member of the expert committee of the Sichuan Provincial Clothing Association; (2) a private market planner and clothing designer; and (3) a lecturer from Chengdu Textile College. Expert reviewers identified one sketch from each product type to be created into prototypes. This decision was based on evaluation according to nine criteria: Recognition of Qiang ethnicity, meaning, beauty, practicality, size, portability, possibility of commercial production, price, and cultural value. Two product prototypes for each of the most suitable designs were developed for further investigation. Subsequently, in January 2023, the researchers deployed questionnaires to survey 106 randomly sampled domestic tourists (not the same sample as the prior survey) from Generation Y to evaluate the prototypes according to the same nine criteria and capture their consumption preferences and perceptions related to these Qiang-inspired products (Appendix B).

In this investigation, methodological triangulation was employed as a means to validate the data collected. This process involved cross-verifying information and interpretations from the different methods used in the study—surveys, interviews, and observational data—to ensure

the reliability and validity of the findings (Flick, 2018). By comparing and contrasting the different data sources, inconsistencies could be identified and addressed, thereby strengthening the study's conclusions (Denzin, 2017). The subsequent data analysis phase dissected the characteristics and connotations of Qiang costumes. The purchasing behaviors of Generation Y tourists were analyzed through a market test analysis on questionnaire responses using a statistical software package (SPSS) to examine mean and standard deviation to determine patterns and preferences in purchasing behaviors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Concurrently, the qualitative data from interviews and observations were subjected to typological analysis and analytic induction. The typological analysis allowed for the categorization of data based on predetermined criteria, themes, or types, which were then further explored to uncover patterns and relationships (Hatch, 2023). Analytic induction was used to develop a deeper understanding of the data by identifying instances that did not conform to initial expectations or patterns, thus refining theoretical understandings (Patton, 1999). The data, originally collected in Chinese, were analyzed in the same language to maintain the cultural and contextual integrity of the responses. Subsequent to the analysis, the principal researcher, who is fluent in both Chinese and English, translated the findings into English. This ensured that nuanced cultural concepts were accurately conveyed, thereby facilitating dissemination to a broader audience (Temple & Young, 2004). The research findings are presented below as a descriptive analysis.

Results

The Qiang culture in the Maoxian region is unique. Through an in-depth analysis of Qiang decorative elements and color representation patterns, a deconstruction method was applied to restructure the patterns and create unique and creative cultural design applications. The new products not only focused on decorative colors but also integrated local Qiang cultural resources and incorporated Qiang cultural symbolism. For the first stage of the design process, Qiang pattern elements were classified and analyzed. Subsequently, the collected patterns were refined, applied, and redesigned using modern design techniques, with dress embroidery as the main design element. In the early stages of design, the first pattern draft was completed, summarized, and organized, and then it was combined with Qiang colors to ensure a close relationship with Qiang culture was retained. A series of design solutions were then completed to attract consumers with their beauty, practicality, and real value.

Study and Analysis of Qiang Costumes in Maoxian County

Interview respondents agreed that Qiang clothing reflects shifts in the economy, politics, military strategy, lifestyle, and ideologies, enduring the complexities of cultural intersections. As a cultural asset, it embodies the nation's historical development while enriching cultural and aesthetic ideals. As one local remarked, "The evolution of Qiang clothing is not just a fashion statement but a narrative of our economic and political history" (Respondent A, personal communication, December 12, 2022). Archaeological discoveries from the Neolithic Site of Yingpan Mountain in Maoxian County indicate that the Qiang people have resided there for approximately 5,000 years (Sun & Karin, 2022). The findings, which included pottery, jade, fine stone, bone, and clayware, suggest that Qiang's ancestors mastered sewing techniques over 5,000 years ago and produced rudimentary clothing from animal skins sewn with bone needles (Ye, 2022). As clothing history evolved, so too did its functions of modesty and aesthetics. From these primitive textiles and sewing tools to the present day, the indigenous Qiang people have preserved their cultural essence through generations, interweaving their history and their vivid cultural narrative within the fabric of their attire: "Each pattern represents a chapter in our

heritage and the journey of our people” (Respondent B, personal communication, December 15, 2022).

The researchers observed the dress styles of the Qiang people in Maoxian in December 2022. Findings showed that Qiang men’s costumes are a striking blend of cultural aesthetics and practicality, characterized by black and white headpieces, long white shirts with distinctive shoulders, intricately embroidered stomach areas, and belts. The men traditionally don long trousers wrapped with hemp cloth. Their attire is adapted for different activities, from work to ceremonial functions, thus demonstrating the uniqueness of Qiang men’s fashion. Women's clothing, on the other hand, varies remarkably within the Qiang community according to regional peculiarities (Figure 1). For instance, in Maoxian County, located on the Aba Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the attire represents a fusion of history and culture. Specifically, the county is renowned for its unique “straight hat” and colorful palette. In the Chibu Area, encompassing Qugu, Yadu, and Weicheng Townships, Qiang women are known for their ‘tile’ headwear and brightly embroidered waists, the patterns of which change with age. Ancient armor-dancing and the influence of Tibetan Buddhism are also evident here. In Weimen, Goukou, and Yonghe Townships, women sport unique dish-shaped headwear made from narrow cloth strips with exquisite embroidery characterized by chrysanthemums, sunflowers, and bottles. In contrast, the attire in Dioxu Town, Pinghua Gully, Pacific Township, and Shi Dagan ranges from elegant and dignified costumes with silver chest decorations to eye-catching fluorescent dresses. Notably, Qiang women in Sanlong and Baixi Townships wear a unique “round pa” headscarf decorated with intricate embroidery that skillfully merges tie embroidery and stitching techniques. Tumen District, the easternmost edge of Maoxian County, is distinctive for the embroidery of its colorful waistband, displaying patterns like chrysanthemums and treasure bottles. In Black Tiger Township, women honor the legendary Black Tiger General by wearing white “pa,” with embroidery mainly featuring bright colors and appearing predominantly on clothing and shoes.

Figure 1

A Qiang Woman from Sanlong Township Wearing Traditional Attire



Interview respondents concurred that Qiang costumes, a significant facet of cultural and historical heritage, serve multiple purposes, including protection, identification, religious symbolism, historical record, and aesthetic appeal. They are carefully crafted to aid the Qiang people in surviving harsh environments while also functioning as visible markers of gender, age, profession, and societal roles. In religious practices, these garments bridge the human-

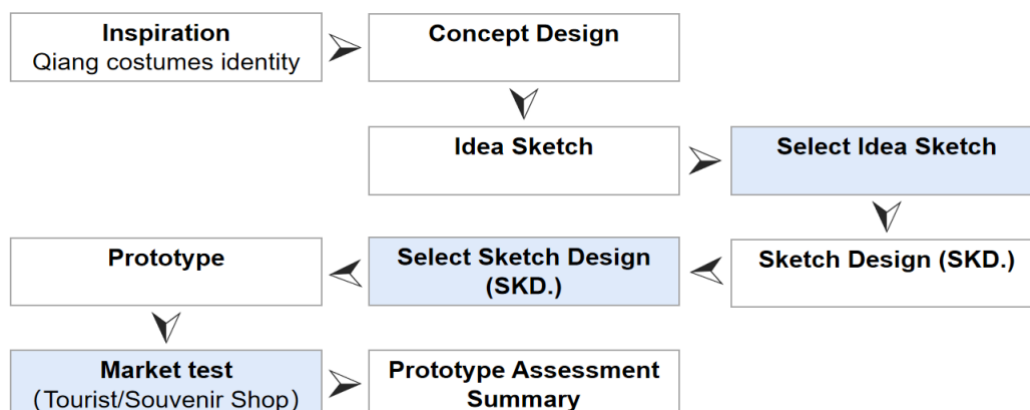
divine gap, being integral to Qiang nature worship, ancestral worship, and Buddhist rituals. Each piece of clothing stands as a testament to the Qiang civilization's progress and cultural evolution, weaving a narrative of their rich history. The aesthetic role of these costumes has grown over time, transitioning from simple utility to symbols of beauty and cultural identity. Key features of Qiang costumes embody their unique traditions and values, such as the extensive representation of sheep, a revered animal, and the prominence of the color white, a symbol of happiness and beauty. One elder noted that "the sheep's representation and the color white are not mere design choices; they are intrinsic to our cultural identity, representing joy and the essence of life" (Respondent C, personal communication, December 15, 2022). Fire, a sacred element in Qiang culture, finds expression in the garments of elder men, mirroring the perpetually burning flame in Qiang households, a symbol of life's constant energy. Lastly, the sun, considered one of the most vital gods, is frequently depicted in Qiang clothing, reflecting their gratitude for its light and warmth. In essence, the Qiang costume culture, resplendent with its multifaceted historical, cultural, and symbolic connotations, is a living testament to the civilization's adaptive history and its commitment to preserving its unique identity.

Product Design Process

An initial consumer survey was conducted with Generation Y (Millennials), those born between 1981 and 1996, the target consumer group for products created from the application of Qiang designs. This digitally-proficient generation tends not to display high brand loyalty, focusing more on product quality and cost-effectiveness (Hall et al., 2017). This is consistent with the survey findings, which indicated that cultural heritage preservation (23.17%), attractiveness (21.71%), and value (19.76%) were the three most important selection criteria for tourists when considering cultural souvenirs. Generation Y shoppers are accustomed to online shopping, especially on mobile platforms, and exhibit a preference for individuality, innovation, and environmentally friendly, sustainable purchases (Ordun, 2015). Social media plays a significant role in their shopping experiences, being used for product research, advice, and sharing of experiences (Sago, 2010). A popular tool among this group is the mood board, a visual medium used to express emotions, creativity, and to articulate concepts and ideas clearly (Lucero Vera, 2009). This group's purchasing behaviors, innovative and environmentally conscious inclinations, and proficiency in digital technology make them an ideal target for marketing Qiang costume souvenirs, both within Qiang communities and beyond. Based on initial research of the Qiang costume designs and the results of the consumer survey, the researchers designed new products according to the design process outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Design Process for This Investigation



As shown in Figure 3, the source of design inspiration is the patterns in Qiang costumes. The patterns and decorations on Qiang costumes are mostly symbols of traditional myths, legends, and historical events and have rich cultural connotations. The researchers extracted selected symbols from the clothing and converted them into sketches that could be applied to new products. In order to obtain new product designs but retain the cultural identity of Qiang Costumes, the researcher then created new design elements using simplification (Figure 4).

Figure 3

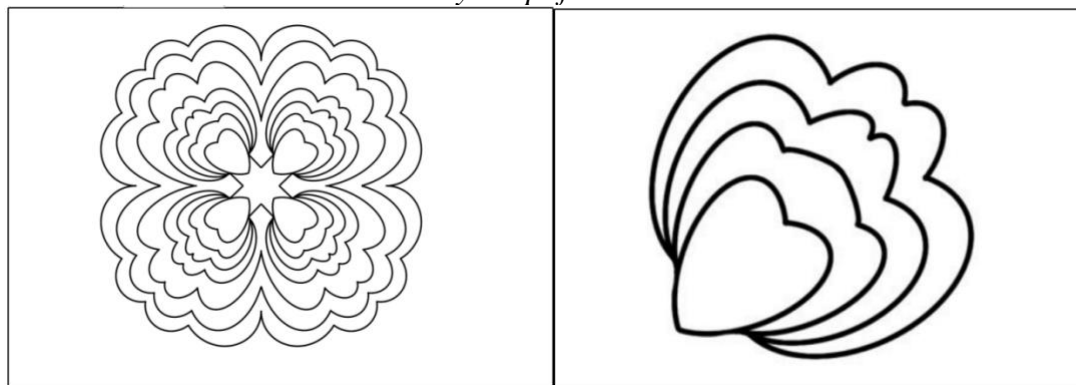
Selected Design Elements Extracted from Qiang Traditional Dress



Note. From the top left, clockwise: Flower pattern from the Qiang headband, fire pattern from the Qiang Shiobi costume, Qiang embroidery edge pattern, Sheep's Head pattern from Qiang children's dress.

Figure 4

The New Flower Pattern Created by Simplification



The researchers then sketched three product designs for five different types of product in consultation with Qiang locals and drawing upon the preferences of Generation Y consumers identified in the preliminary survey: keychain (with a 12.59% chance of purchase from

Generation Y tourists), tableware (12.04%), bookmark (11.48%), fridge magnet (11.3%) and phone case (11.11%). These product types were selected based on their popularity among Generation Y consumers, reflecting contemporary trends and the potential for cultural engagement. Products eliminated by the initial survey were cup (10.93%), doll (10.19%), notebook (7.78%), handbag (6.85%), and pillow (5.74%). The sketches were then subjected to evaluation by a panel of experts in design and cultural heritage, who assessed each concept against a comprehensive set of criteria based on the essence of Qiang cultural representation: Recognition of Qiang ethnicity, meaning, beauty, practicality, size, portability, the possibility of commercial production, price, and cultural value. The experts recommended one sketch from each product category to advance to the prototype stage, choosing designs that effectively harmonized the intrinsic cultural elements of Qiang identity with the functional requirements and aesthetic expectations of modern consumer goods. Two prototypes for the endorsed designs were then created. A selection of the final product prototypes is displayed in Figure 5.

Figure 5

New Product Prototypes



Note. From the top left, clockwise: keychain, bookmark, phone case, fridge magnet, tableware.

The ten prototypes were shared with 106 randomly sampled members of Generation Y for evaluation according to the same nine criteria as the expert review, all of which have received very good feedback from respondents. These results are displayed below in Table 1.

Souvenir 5, a piece of tableware, topped the list with a score of 4.89. This was closely followed by Souvenir 7, a bookmark, with a score of 4.87. Souvenir 2 and Souvenir 4, a keychain and another piece of tableware, respectively, received scores of 4.86 and 4.85. The list continued with Souvenir 1 (Keychain 1), Souvenir 15 (phone case 3), Souvenir 10 (refrigerator sticker 1), and Souvenir 13 (phone case 1), all obtaining very good ratings within the range of 4.82 to 4.84. Souvenir 8 (Bookmark 2) and Souvenir 12 (Refrigerator sticker 3) finished the list with ratings of 4.78 and 4.74, respectively. On average, the rating for all souvenirs was very good, at 4.83, with different areas for improvement suggested for each item. From the feedback of the 106 survey participants, it was apparent that the souvenirs were well-received. This positive response suggests that the design of these souvenirs is an effective means of promoting and preserving the unique culture of this minority group.

Table 1
Results of the Market Test of Prototypes Developed During the Investigation

Souvenir 1 (Keychain 1)									
Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	100	3	3	0	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
2. Meaning	101	4	1	0	0	106	4.94	0.42	Very good
3. Beauty	90	10	6	0	0	106	4.79	0.37	Very good
4. Practicality	99	2	3	2	0	106	4.87	0.41	Very good
5. Size	104	1	1	0	0	106	4.97	0.44	Very good
6. Portability	98	2	3	3	0	106	4.84	0.41	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	89	5	12	0	0	106	4.73	0.36	Very good
8. Price	92	5	6	3	0	106	4.75	0.37	Very good
9. Cultural value	96	2	4	4	0	106	4.79	0.39	Very good
	869	34	39	12	0	954	4.84	0.40	Very good

Souvenir 2 (Keychain 2)									
Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	96	2	4	4	0	106	4.79	0.39	Very good
2. Meaning	102	1	3	0	0	106	4.93	0.43	Very good
3. Beauty	89	5	12	0	0	106	4.73	0.36	Very good
4. Practicality	99	2	3	2	0	106	4.87	0.41	Very good
5. Size	103	2	1	0	0	106	4.96	0.43	Very good
6. Portability	98	2	3	3	0	106	4.84	0.41	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	100	2	4	0	0	106	4.91	0.42	Very good
8. Price	92	5	6	3	0	106	4.75	0.37	Very good
9. Cultural value	104	1	1	0	0	106	4.97	0.44	Very good
	883	22	37	12	0	954	4.86	0.41	Very good

Souvenir 4 (Tableware 1)									
Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	96	3	3	4	0	106	4.80	0.39	Very good
2. Meaning	102	2	2	0	0	106	4.94	0.43	Very good
3. Beauty	88	6	11	1	0	106	4.71	0.35	Very good
4. Practicality	99	2	3	2	0	106	4.87	0.41	Very good
5. Size	103	2	1	0	0	106	4.96	0.43	Very good
6. Portability	98	2	3	3	0	106	4.84	0.41	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	97	3	4	2	0	106	4.84	0.40	Very good
8. Price	93	5	5	3	0	106	4.77	0.38	Very good
9. Cultural value	100	1	5	0	0	106	4.90	0.42	Very good
	876	26	37	15	0	954	4.85	0.40	Very good

Souvenir 5 (Tableware 2)									
Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	87	12	5	2	0	106	4.74	0.35	Very good
2. Meaning	100	2	2	1	1	106	4.88	0.42	Very good
3. Beauty	101	2	1	2	0	106	4.91	0.42	Very good
4. Practicality	99	3	4	0	0	106	4.90	0.41	Very good
5. Size	102	2	2	0	0	106	4.94	0.43	Very good
6. Portability	105	0	1	0	0	106	4.98	0.44	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	100	3	3	0	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
8. Price	104	1	1	0	0	106	4.97	0.44	Very good
9. Cultural value	90	11	2	3	0	106	4.77	0.36	Very good
	888	36	21	8	1	954	4.89	0.41	Very good
Souvenir 7 (Bookmark 1)									
Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	90	5	7	4	0	106	4.71	0.36	Very good
2. Meaning	104	1	1	0	0	106	4.97	0.44	Very good
3. Beauty	100	3	3	0	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
4. Practicality	90	5	6	4	1	106	4.69	0.36	Very good
5. Size	98	2	4	2	0	106	4.85	0.41	Very good
6. Portability	103	2	1	0	0	106	4.96	0.43	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	100	3	3	0	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
8. Price	97	4	1	4	0	106	4.83	0.40	Very good
9. Cultural value	105	1	0	0	0	106	4.99	0.44	Very good
	887	26	26	14	1	954	4.87	0.41	Very good
Souvenir 8 (Bookmark 2)									
Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	90	7	5	4	0	106	4.73	0.36	Very good
2. Meaning	101	1	2	1	1	106	4.89	0.42	Very good
3. Beauty	88	8	6	2	2	106	4.68	0.35	Very good
4. Practicality	98	5	2	1	0	106	4.89	0.41	Very good
5. Size	100	2	3	0	1	106	4.89	0.42	Very good
6. Portability	90	2	8	4	2	106	4.64	0.36	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	103	2	1	0	0	106	4.96	0.43	Very good
8. Price	80	23	3	0	0	106	4.73	0.32	Very good
9. Cultural value	78	19	8	1	0	106	4.64	0.31	Very good
	828	69	38	13	6	954	4.78	0.37	Very good

Souvenir 10 (Refrigerator Sticker 1)

Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	88	6	11	1	0	106	4.71	0.35	Very good
2. Meaning	101	2	3	0	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
3. Beauty	90	9	7	0	0	106	4.78	0.36	Very good
4. Practicality	99	2	4	1	0	106	4.88	0.41	Very good
5. Size	105	0	1	0	0	106	4.98	0.44	Very good
6. Portability	90	6	5	5	0	106	4.71	0.36	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	80	12	8	5	1	106	4.56	0.31	Very good
8. Price	104	1	0	1	0	106	4.96	0.44	Very good
9. Cultural value	100	2	0	4	0	106	4.87	0.42	Very good
	857	40	39	17	1	954	4.82	0.39	Very good

Souvenir 12 (Refrigerator Sticker 3)

Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	100	1	2	3	0	106	4.87	0.42	Very good
2. Meaning	90	3	6	5	2	106	4.64	0.36	Very good
3. Beauty	88	6	4	6	2	106	4.62	0.35	Very good
4. Practicality	99	3	4	0	0	106	4.90	0.41	Very good
5. Size	101	2	3	0	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
6. Portability	78	23	2	3	0	106	4.66	0.31	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	96	4	5	1	0	106	4.84	0.39	Very good
8. Price	89	3	5	5	4	106	4.58	0.36	Very good
9. Cultural value	80	18	6	1	1	106	4.65	0.32	Very good
	821	63	37	24	9	954	4.74	0.37	Very good

Souvenir 13 (Phone Case 1)

Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	88	6	8	4	0	106	4.68	0.35	Very good
2. Meaning	101	2	2	1	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
3. Beauty	99	3	4	0	0	106	4.90	0.41	Very good
4. Practicality	80	16	6	3	1	106	4.61	0.31	Very good
5. Size	90	5	4	5	2	106	4.66	0.36	Very good
6. Portability	96	4	2	1	3	106	4.78	0.39	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	102	3	1	0	0	106	4.95	0.43	Very good
8. Price	100	4	2	0	0	106	4.92	0.42	Very good
9. Cultural value	96	3	5	1	1	106	4.81	0.39	Very good
	852	46	34	15	7	954	4.80	0.39	Very good

Souvenir 15 (Phone Case 3)									
Question	Opinion Level					N	\bar{x}	SD	Result
	5	4	3	2	1				
1. Recognition of Qiang ethnicity	98	1	4	2	1	106	4.82	0.41	Very good
2. Meaning	105	1	0	0	0	106	4.99	0.44	Very good
3. Beauty	89	6	9	2	0	106	4.72	0.36	Very good
4. Practicality	103	3	0	0	0	106	4.97	0.43	Very good
5. Size	100	3	1	1	1	106	4.89	0.42	Very good
6. Portability	90	3	5	4	4	106	4.61	0.36	Very good
7. Possibility of commercial production	80	15	8	1	2	106	4.60	0.31	Very good
8. Price	104	1	0	1	0	106	4.96	0.44	Very good
9. Cultural value	102	2	1	1	0	106	4.93	0.43	Very good
	871	35	28	12	8	954	4.83	0.40	Very good

Discussion

The Qiang costumes in Maoxian County have unique cultural characteristics and are of high artistic and cultural value. Among Chinese minority costumes, Qiang fabrics have an important position, a long history, and a profound cultural heritage (An, 2011). New designs based on ethnic minority costumes must focus on cultural inheritance and innovation while respecting the cultural traditions and the creativity of ethnic peoples in order to achieve cultural diversity and development (Asplet & Cooper, 2000). Through the study and inheritance of minority costumes, the diversity and richness of Chinese culture can be promoted, and the international spread and exchange of Chinese culture can be further promoted.

Adding to this notion of cultural value and heritage, the representation of such ethnic attire in tourist merchandise raises the critical question of authenticity, a subject of longstanding debate in anthropological literature (Xie & Wall, 2009). The authenticity imbued in these cultural expressions, particularly when fashioned into souvenirs, can significantly amplify their perceived value (Healy, 1994). Tourists are drawn not only to the aesthetic and cultural aspects of such merchandise but also to the assurance that they are acquiring a piece of genuine cultural heritage, as authenticity suggests a direct lineage to the original culture and its artisans (Swanson & Timothy, 2012). Qiang costumes serve as a potent form of cultural tourism that can attract visitors to Maoxian County; however, souvenir products must originate from the culture they represent. In the context of Qiang attire, and as practiced in this study, this would mean being created by the Qiang people themselves, thus ensuring a connection to the cultural and spiritual lineage of the community (Soukhathammavong & Park, 2019). This underscores the importance of cultural products in maintaining a tangible and meaningful link to their cultural origins. As the Qiang community continues to create garments and souvenirs that reflect their heritage, it is essential that these items, and any spin-off products, are marketed in a manner that respects and upholds their cultural significance, ensuring that the narrative of Qiang people remains intrinsically tied to their products (Elomba & Yun, 2018). Therefore, when integrating Qiang cultural motifs into fashion and souvenirs, it is crucial that these representations are handled with the utmost integrity to preserve the authenticity that is so valued in cultural expressions and exchanges.

The application of Qiang costume elements in souvenir design during this investigation presents a novel approach to merging traditional cultural aesthetics with modern fashion sensibilities, offering rich opportunities to diversify and enrich contemporary product offerings.

The process was centered around extracting distinct elements from Qiang costumes—symbols and motifs steeped in myth, history, and the natural world—and incorporating them into modern product designs: keychains, tableware, bookmarks, fridge magnets, and phone cases. The selection of these product categories was informed by Generation Y's preferences and habits, underscoring the importance of consumer-focused design. Respecting the cultural heritage of the Qiang people was a vital component of this process. During design, authenticity was ensured by simplifying and adapting traditional elements in collaboration with local Qiang people rather than completely reimagining them. This approach allowed the design to stay rooted in Qiang culture while also appealing to the modern aesthetics preferred by Generation Y. Careful attention was paid to ensuring that the designs were representative of the Qiang ethnicity, which was evaluated based on criteria such as recognizability, beauty, and cultural value.

In response to the emerging challenges and opportunities in preserving and promoting Qiang culture, this study aimed to reconcile the seemingly discordant themes within the literature by bridging tradition with modern market demands. The investigation draws upon Zhang's (2021) emphasis on cultural representation in modern visual communication design and Cohen's (1989; 2000) nuanced understanding of cultural commodification whilst mindful of potential pitfalls highlighted by Gertner (2019). In doing so, the researchers have aligned with He and Chen's (2019) proposition for conservation initiatives rooted in cultural identity rather than mere economic prosperity. The focus on the development of Qiang products, infusing their unique cultural symbols into souvenir design, is intended to counter market homogenization (Her & Buley-Meissner, 2021; Liang et al., 2020) while also preserving and proliferating the unique Qiang cultural heritage. At the same time, careful considerations were given to prevent cultural appropriation and ensure that the cultural essence of the Qiang people was respectfully embodied in the designs.

Promoting and marketing these Qiang-inspired designs in the marketplace presents a unique opportunity for cultural exchange and understanding. As the products bear the distinctive markers of Qiang culture, they can serve as conversation starters about the rich history and culture of the Qiang people. The strong alignment between the characteristics of the products and the preferences of Generation Y—such as individuality, innovation, and sustainable purchases—indicates a promising market potential for these designs. Moreover, the digital proficiency of Generation Y suggests that online platforms and social media could be particularly effective channels for promotion. This will not only enhance the marketability of the products but also play a significant role in preserving and promoting the rich cultural heritage of the Qiang people, showcasing their sartorial culture to a global audience. However, further investigation and potential training of local Qiang people in digital commerce is recommended before this avenue of marketing and sales is pursued. It is vital that local people retain the intellectual property ownership of their heritage designs, and in order for this to happen (and for the new products to have value) local people must be able to maintain and use digital sales platforms (Ramadani et al., 2014; Yin et al., 2021). This will also mitigate against potential misuse of traditional culture for tourism purposes under the guise of development, and ensure that Qiang people and culture are the primary actors in the evolution of product innovations (Sajib, 2022).

In contemporary Chinese society, the status and influence of ethnic minorities continue to garner increasing recognition. As part of this shift, there has been a significant revival of ethnic minority identity, spurred by a growing appreciation of cultural diversity and a conscious movement away from cultural homogenization. This re-emergence of ethnic identity is manifesting itself in various ways, one of which is the prominent use of traditional ethnic elements in contemporary design, such as the treatment of Qiang costumes in this paper. The Qiang people, as an ethnic minority, represent a significant facet of China's rich cultural mosaic. The integration of Qiang costume elements in modern products not only lends a unique

aesthetic appeal but also symbolizes the convergence of the past and the present, the traditional and the contemporary. It is an innovative approach to preserving and transmitting the cultural values of the Qiang people, which remains an important task in a world where rapid modernization often risks the erosion of cultural heritage.

This shift towards the incorporation of ethnic minority elements in modern design is reflective of an increasing societal appreciation of cultural pluralism and inclusiveness. Cultural pluralism celebrates the diversity of cultures within a society and recognizes their equal standing. By acknowledging and incorporating the distinct cultural markers of the Qiang people into modern products, a strong message is conveyed about the value of cultural diversity and the need for mutual respect among different cultures. Promoting communication and understanding among different cultures in China, especially between ethnic minority cultures and the mainstream national culture, is an ongoing challenge. However, the successful application of Qiang elements in product design, as explored in this investigation, provides an effective model. By appreciating and integrating the unique aesthetics of the Qiang culture into everyday items, there is a dialogue between the minority and the majority cultures. Such initiatives not only foster understanding and respect but also promote cultural inclusivity, highlighting that the mainstream national culture is not a single, homogenous entity but a diverse and vibrant blend of multiple influences. Thus, the Qiang-inspired designs are more than just aesthetically pleasing products—they are emblematic of a broader cultural shift towards inclusivity and appreciation of diversity. They offer a way to navigate the complexities of cultural preservation in an ever-evolving society, all the while fostering a deeper understanding and respect for the richness of ethnic minority cultures.

Limitations and Recommendations

The researchers are conscious of certain limitations common in cultural studies. Firstly, due to the wide scope of Qiang culture, elements of their ethnic identity could not be sufficiently covered, presenting a constraint in the breadth of analysis. Secondly, the research is hindered by its focus on a particular Qiang region, meaning its applicability is confined to this particular ethnic group, and the findings are thus limited in their generalizability. Lastly, the inherently subjective nature of cultural analysis has led to subjective considerations regarding cultural sensitivity and appropriation. These limitations can all be mitigated by further research in the subject and geographical area, which will deepen the academic understanding of these research topics and this ethnic minority group. This study is thus intended as an exploratory foundation for the topic of cultural design using traditional Qiang costumes as the primary inspiration.

For the effective preservation and commercialization of Qiang culture, the researchers wish to present four key recommendations. First, the protection and inheritance of Qiang traditional culture is essential. This entails safeguarding both tangible and intangible cultural manifestations, such as architecture, cultural relics, paintings, customs, and crafts, with a focus on sustainably developing Qiang tourism souvenirs (Cohen, 2008; He & Chen, 2019). Second, the emphasis should be on product development. This involves refining national cultural symbols and enhancing product innovation. For instance, using unique Qiang cultural elements in innovative design or increasing product practicality by integrating traditional Qiang embroidery patterns into modern items like bags can stimulate purchase desires. Third, it is crucial to increase marketing efforts, such as building a Qiang cultural brand, improving industry organization, and broadening marketing channels, including traditional and new media platforms. The goal is to enhance market influence and extend product information reach. Fourth, a sound government development guidance mechanism is needed, which includes policy and economic support, skill improvement via education and training, and system guarantee, among others. Through all of these recommendations, the involvement of local

Qiang people is crucial, and the cultural literacy of local communities must be expanded to ensure that authentic cultural artifacts and practices are preserved. This will contribute to sustainable cultural inheritance, development, and prosperity, ultimately strengthening the Qiang ethnic identity and the local economy in equal measure.

Concluding Remarks

The study presented a multifaceted understanding of the Qiang costumes of Maoxian within the framework of cultural preservation, economic development, and design application, assessing their cultural identity and significance for local product development. Empirical findings and literature related to the first research objective illustrated the costumes as complex symbols of the Qiang people's historical and social trajectory. This not only documented the aesthetic features of the costumes but also positioned them within the socio-historical context of the Qiang people, highlighting their evolution and significance over time. For the second research objective, the researchers analyzed the cultural identity embedded within Qiang costumes and explored their potential for translation into local products. The findings demonstrated the inherent cultural values and symbols in Qiang costumes, recognizing their potential to contribute to the local economy while preserving cultural identity. In response to the third objective, the findings were applied to the design of modern products inspired by Qiang costumes. Collaboration with local stakeholders and adherence to design principles ensured the creation of products that are not only culturally authentic but also align with contemporary market demands. The consumer acceptance of these products underscores the potential of cultural elements in enhancing product value and marketability.

In conclusion, this investigation underscores the importance of a methodical approach to understanding and utilizing cultural heritage, ensuring that such endeavors are respectful, authentic, and economically viable. The positive response to the newly designed products validates the study's approach and methodology, offering a replicable model for similar initiatives aiming to harmonize tradition with contemporary design and market dynamics. The study, therefore, not only enriches the academic discourse on cultural heritage and design but also provides practical insights for the sustainable and respectful utilization of cultural elements in product development. The implications of this investigation are:

- The study reinforces the significance of culturally inspired product design as a viable strategy for economic development in ethnic minority regions. It demonstrates that integrating traditional cultural motifs into modern product designs can yield positive market responses, suggesting a pathway for sustainable economic growth while preserving cultural heritage.
- The research highlights the importance of community involvement and stakeholder collaboration in the design process. By engaging local artisans, government bodies, and design experts, the study ensures that the products are not only culturally authentic but also meet contemporary market needs and consumer preferences, fostering a model for inclusive and participatory cultural preservation.
- The positive reception of the designed products by Generation Y consumers indicates a broader market trend toward valuing cultural authenticity and heritage in consumer goods. This finding suggests the potential for expanding the market reach of culturally-inspired products, catering to a consumer base that values uniqueness, authenticity, and cultural narratives in their purchases.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Notes on Contributors

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Appendix I – Survey Questions regarding Generation Y tourist consumption behaviors

- 1. Gender**
 - a. Male**
 - b. Female**
- 2. How old are you?**
- 3. Will you buy souvenirs with cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities?**
 - a. Yes**
 - b. No**
- 4. Why do you buy souvenirs with cultural characteristics of ethnic minorities?**
 - a. Attractive design**
 - b. Practical use**
 - c. Fair price**
 - d. Good meaning**
 - e. Express local characteristics and cultural heritage**
 - f. Collection value and commemorative significance**
- 5. Which 5 of the following 10 cultural characteristic souvenirs of ethnic minorities would you buy?**
 - a. Key chain**
 - b. Bookmark**
 - c. Notebook**
 - d. Doll**
 - e. Tableware**
 - f. Handbag**
 - g. Fridge magnet**
 - h. Phone case**
 - i. Pillow**
 - j. Cup**
- 6. What are the reasons why you don't buy souvenirs with ethnic minorities' cultural characteristics?**
 - a. Not in the habit of buying souvenirs**
 - b. Poor functionality**
 - c. Not distinctive**
 - d. Inconvenient to carry**
- 7. Where do you buy souvenirs with ethnic minority culture characteristics?**
 - a. In person while travelling**
 - b. Through others**
 - c. Online**
- 8. Which feature do you think is more important in ethnic minority cultural souvenirs?**
 - a. Low price**
 - b. Creative features**
 - c. Practical value**
 - d. Regional features**
 - e. Aesthetics**
- 9. When you buy cultural souvenirs of ethnic minorities, what is the most important factor?**
 - a. Price**
 - b. Quality**
 - c. Craft**
 - d. Source**

- 10.** Will you support the innovation of ethnic minority cultural souvenirs?
- a.** Yes
 - b.** No

Appendix II – Survey Questions regarding Generation Y product evaluation

- 1.** Gender
 - a.** Male
 - b.** Female
- 2.** Age
- 3.** [Product Image]
- 4.** Rate each of the following characteristics from 1 to 5 (1 = Low, 5 = High)
 - a.** Recognition of Qiang ethnicity
 - b.** Meaning
 - c.** Beauty
 - d.** Practicality
 - e.** Size
 - f.** Portability
 - g.** Possibility of commercial production
 - h.** Price
 - i.** Cultural value