

Fabric Icons: The Impact of Traditional Costume Patterns on Ethnic Identity of the Sichuan Qiang Community

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ABSTRACT: *This is a comprehensive study focused on the symbolic significance of traditional costume patterns in the Qiang community of Sichuan. Recognizing culture as the soul of an ethnic group, this study sheds light on how these traditional costume patterns visually represent the Qiang ethnic culture and portray their tenacity and character. Utilizing systematic research into these visually striking patterns, which form a graphical system, this study offers a truthful depiction of the rich cultural heritage of the Qiang people. The paper discloses how a deeper understanding of these traditional costume patterns can enhance the Qiang community's understanding and appreciation of their indigenous culture and nurture a strong sense of ethnic identity. Engaging with these patterns is not merely an act of cultural preservation but also serves as a potent tool to consolidate unity within the community. By revealing the interplay between traditional costume design and cultural identity, this study contributes to the broader discourse on ethnic studies, cultural preservation, and anthropological design. This research provides an insightful perspective for cultural and social anthropologists, designers, and those interested in ethnic cultures and their visual representations.*

KEYWORDS: Qiang ethnicity, traditional costume patterns, Sichuan Qiang culture, ethnic identity, cultural preservation

INTRODUCTION

Tracing back to the Xia and Shang dynasties, the term 'Qiang' denoted diverse nomadic tribes in Northwestern China with varied languages, customs, and attire. Resulting from various migrations and interactions with Han and Tibetans, numerous subgroups emerged, blooming into the modern Qiang post-1949, during China's large-scale ethnic identification (Li Yuxuan, 2021; Katiana Le Mentec, 2017; Yinzhong, 2009; Honglie & Hongyu, 2021; Gaopeng Zhang, 2017).

Today, the recognized Qiang ethnic minority exceeds a population of 300,000, predominantly inhabiting areas like the A' Ba Autonomous Prefecture and Mian Yang City in Sichuan Province (Yinzhong, 2009). Over time, amid adversities like wars, harsh environments, and material scarcity, they've developed unique costume styles epitomizing their experiences and cultural footprint (Jiao Feng, 2019).

Following their official ethnic recognition, these costume features have become symbols reflecting their historical experiences and ethnic identity (Gaopeng Zhang, 2017). This study hinges on the investigation of these costume patterns among Sichuan's Qiang population, representative of the broader Qiang costume narrative.

Adopting a Qualitative Case Study method, this study delves into the shape, color, composition, and layout of Sichuan Qiang traditional costume patterns through exhaustive analysis of images, texts, and other data. The anticipated contribution includes enriching the theoretical system of Qiang traditional costume pattern studies, fostering understanding towards Qiang costume culture among other cultural groups, promoting the Qiang's self-recognition of their culture, and thereby catalyzing further cultural development.

Earthquake

On May 12, 2008, a catastrophic earthquake struck the Wenchuan region of China's Sichuan Province, majorly affecting numerous counties across Sichuan, Gansu, Shanxi, and the Chongqing Municipal area. The quake, which spanned a vast area and impacted an untold number of residents, was regarded as China's most calamitous earthquake since the foundation of the People's Republic. The disaster resulted in a tremendous number of fatalities, significant economic losses, and a considerable reduction in the Qiang population.

The Wenchuan Earthquake was a cultural disaster as well as a natural one, causing severe damage to the traditional Qiang culture, villages, cultural heritage, and instruments (Xu & Chen, 2011; Yi, 2017). Areas with densest Qiang populations significantly overlap with earthquake-prone regions, further exacerbating the impact (Qiu Yue, 2020). In historical terms, the earthquake led to the loss of over 80% of the Qiang culture experts at the Bei Chuan Qiang Ethnic Research Institute. It also buried or destroyed most documents, archives, and digital materials in a Qiang ethnic museum, including all collections in the Beichuan Qiang Folklore Museum (Hongtu, 2016; Xu & Chen, 2011).

This irreparable loss of cultural heritage damaged the Qiang's cultural foundation and affected the ethnic group's identity (Yi, 2017). However, subsequent recovery efforts saw increased attention on preserving the Qiang culture post-disaster. The Qiang cultural heritage received unprecedented

protection, with increased construction and development in Qiang areas to boost local self-confidence, promote their culture, tourism, and economy (Qiu Yue, 2020; Xiong, 2020).

Efforts from the Qiang and the larger society aim at salvaging their cultural heritage from the ruins and deepening Qiang culture research (Lijuan & Jian, 2017). Emphasis is also put on protecting traditional costume patterns that encapsulate the Qiang' ethnic spirit and material culture (Ti, 2021). However, debates persist on the most efficient protection and preservation strategies.

A Cultural Importance

In an endeavor to enrich the theoretical systems of the Qiang patterns, this research delves into the symbolic language of the Qiang ethnic patterns. These patterns manifest in the carved beams and elaborate paintings on the facades of buildings, intricate carvings on furniture surfaces, decorative wallpaper, instrument patterns, and traditional costume patterns. They collectively encapsulate and express the history and culture of the Qiang ethnicity.

From a design perspective, we mainly explore the visual presentation aspects such as shapes, colors, composition, and layout within Qiang traditional costume patterns to further interpret this symbolic language. This systematic exploration transcends the boundaries of conventional research, not just limited to the historical or cultural significance of the patterns. The focus is redirected towards the aesthetics of these patterns, thereby expanding the scope of pattern research and offering a comprehensive understanding of the Qiang ethnic designs.

In further exploring Qiang costume culture, a shift in traditional research approaches is recommended. Rather than the customary focus on the shape-making process, costume categories, cultural underpinnings, and practical usage of patterns, there is a need for a more innovative method. Considering the long-standing development history and ever-transforming forms of Qiang costume patterns, it could be insightful to interpret traditional costume patterns as unique “texts” and each pattern as a distinct “word”. This lens allows for an examination of the regularity and logic within the visualization process of the costume patterns. By deriving the pattern's design system and contributing fresh perspectives, this approach seeks to enrich Qiang costume culture studies.

The global challenge in bolstering the protection, utilization, and inheritance of cultural relics and traditional culture prompts a critical look into the potential of Qiang traditional costume patterns. Integrating these cultural cues into contemporary design activities emerges as a significant method of exhibition and cultural preservation. Early attempts saw design activities mimicking cultural relics or simply appending humanistic elements to products. The trend, as evident in recent design works (Kai & Wei'an, 2022), has shifted towards a more meaningful blend of cultural connotations with product functionality. Redesigning Qiang traditional costume patterns provides a platform for

the cultural narrative to continue. This exploration, from a design perspective, can equip designers with a richer palette of patterns, fostering creativity, and precision in merging these patterns with product designs. This approach culminates in the creation of innovative works, pleasing to the eye, and in sync with both contemporary lifestyle and traditional culture. It broadens audience exposure to Qiang patterns, thereby catalyzing the protection and progressive development of Qiang traditional culture.

In modern society, the symbolic patterns found on ethnic costumes contain diverse cultural connotations and serve as a method for recording history. These designs are improved, duplicated, displayed, and utilized repeatedly across various temporal and spatial scopes. Furthermore, these patterns play a critical role in how the Qiang people communicate their unique ethnic identity to those outside their community. By studying the patterns of Qiang ethnic costumes, researchers are able to externalize the salient features of Qiang culture, providing outsiders with visually perceptible knowledge. This helps to liberate Qiang costumes from monotonous stereotypes, often formed by the over-commercialization of ethnic costumes during post-earthquake reconstruction and cultural development. Additionally, this method supports the reimagining of Qiang costumes, leading to the creation of designs that are more orthodox, diverse, and representative of the rich cultural pluralism of the Qiang people.

The promotion of the development of Qiang society and culture is intrinsically tied to an understanding and appreciation of traditional costume patterns. Recognizing that culture is the soul of an ethnic group, the visualized images of the Qiang ethnic culture are vividly displayed through these patterns. They effectively reflect the mettle of the Qiang people. Researching into these costume patterns, easily recognizable visual symbols and graphical systems, offers a faithful depiction of the Qiang people's cultural heritage. Furthermore, this research enables us to enrich the Qiang people's understanding of their indigenous culture, enhance their degree of recognition for their ethnic identity, and ultimately, reinforces cohesion among the Qiang ethnicity.

The soul of an ethnic group is encapsulated in its culture, with traditional costume patterns serving as the visualized images of Qiang ethnic culture. These patterns highlight the mettle of the Qiang ethnic groups. To truthfully represent the cultural heritage of the Qiang people, we delve into the research on these costume patterns. These patterns are not just visually striking symbols but also form a sophisticated graphical system. Through such meticulous research, we can deepen the Qiang ethnic group's understanding of their indigenous culture, enhance their recognition of their ethnic identity, and bolster the unity within the Qiang community.

While ethnic costume design has spurred research interest, the study of Qiang ethnic costume patterns remains underexplored due to inadequate systematic studies. This lack of comprehensive research is exacerbated by the impact of modernization, leading to significant challenges in preserving and promoting these unique cultural products (Ma Ning, 2006). The increasingly

globalized world has catalyzed a shift in Qiang people's lifestyle, with traditional Qiang clothing cultures and patterns experiencing a rapid decline as modern clothes gain popularity, especially among the younger generation (Yang, 2018). Furthermore, the shift in living environments, propelled by destructive earthquakes, has augmented their integration into modern ways of living, further jeopardizing their traditional cultural heritage (Honglie, 2020).

Upon the villages' reconstruction, local tourism prompted a surging interest in Qiang costumes. However, these costumes have been modified to appease tourists' aesthetic criteria and exhibit a significant departure from the original cultural connotations and designs (Yunxing, 2017). Consequently, traditional ethnic costumes are frequently isolated from their original context, leading to the dilution of their cultural significance and symbolic meanings (Ti, 2021). Therefore, there is a pressing need for rigorous studies on Qiang ethnic costume patterns and extensive efforts to resuscitate, regenerate, and immortalize the traditional Qiang culture while ensuring the uniqueness and individuality of the Qiang ethnic group.

This research aims to undertake an in-depth examination of the Sichuan Qiang traditional costume patterns, specifically focusing on their shapes, colors, composition, and layout within clothing. The key research questions include identifying the shape aspects (subjects, icons, forms), determining color features, understanding the composition characteristics, and exploring the layout features within the clothing of these traditional patterns.

This study is shaped by a quaternity of theoretical frameworks: formalism theory, the fundamentals of two-dimensional, space creation of basic art and design, color theory, and fashion design basics. These frameworks work in harmony and guide the analysis of the Sichuan Qiang costume patterns' diverse facets including shapes, colors, composition, and clothing layout.

Qiang Patterns: Past Studies

Lu Xun in "The Collection of Essays in Qie Jie Pavilion" emphasizes that a cultural element's global appeal often stems from distinctive ethnic characteristics. These manifest distinctively in costume patterns, which vary in shape, cultural connotations, and aesthetic preferences, reflecting a broad spectrum of cultural diversity. These patterns, shaped over the lengthy course of ethnic evolution, encapsulate everything from worldviews to moral outlooks, and aesthetic standards to lifestyle choices (Pingjing & Yueping, 2021).

The creation of these patterns often involves the depictions of humans, costumes, animals, and other naturally occurring or culturally significant symbols. These patterns serve not only as visual representations but also as cultural bridgeheads, allowing for a shared cultural identity (Xiaodong, 2019).

The Qiang people's history and culture are interestingly relayed through oral description of illustrations, majorly due to the absence of a written word system in the Qiang language (Jiao Feng, 2019). These descriptions cover everything from religious ceremonies to popular myths. Pattern-based communication signifies the Qiang culture, reflecting in various aspects, including architecture, handmade utilities, and costume designs (Xiaofei & Lai, 2018). These patterns are interwoven with Qiang's history and religious belief and facilitate cross-ethnic communication (Xiong, 2020).

The craft of image creation and interpretation is a significant advancement that distinguishes humans from other species (Ti, 2021). Civilization's progression is closely tied with the dependence on pictorial communication. This is true for all ethnic groups, including Chinese ethnicities, whose traditional decorative patterns represent ancient art forms and the epitome of traditional shape-based arts. These patterns evolved along with societal transitions and migrations, maintaining their uniqueness and potential to be passed to subsequent generations. They are aesthetic expressions as well as carriers of social sentiments and cultural consciousness, with meanings running deeper than surface appearances (Xu & Chen, 2011).

Qiang costume patterns, part of graphic art, are carefully designed and richly decorated. These designs encapsulate Qiang cultural concepts, religious beliefs, customs, ethics, etc., highlighting their decorative and artistic values (Yan, 2014).

Picture-reading is vital in preserving Qiang culture. Through a design lens, researchers investigate ethnic art and culture, concentrating on traditional costumes. They analyze costume patterns' shapes, colors, and quality while exploring underlying aesthetic preferences and cultural values. These patterns are treated as a form of "text," where each pattern represents a "word". The goal is to interpret each "word" systematically, examining its meaning, formation, characteristics, and distribution. Simultaneously, the patterns are used to analyze artistic features, aesthetic preferences, color associations, cultural mentality, and lifestyles (Ti, 2021).

Compared to merely collecting tangible cultural artifacts, this picture-based research method provides deeper insight into Qiang culture, helping to safeguard and eternalize it.

Exploring Qiang Patterns: The Research Approach

Traditional Qiang costume patterns largely exist within a two-dimensional space. Understanding their shape can be achieved by reviewing the basics of two-dimensional creation theories. Asakura (1996) suggested that there are three essential elements of formative works: shape, color, and texture. Here, shape includes point, line, face, solid, and space, forming a structured and ordered system, seen not only in architecture or interiors but also in artistic representations. Shape can further be classified based on its regularity and order as either fixed (mathematically structured) or unfixed. This classification aids in understanding clothing patterns.

Texture, viewed as the skin of an object, is relevant to all objects and is closely tied to the feel of rough or smooth surfaces. Texture plays into both sight and touch, with minute textures being close to color and large unit textures lending to configuration recognition. Texture, however, isn't a color or configuration but needs a sense of touch, which is not a point of focus in Qiang traditional costume patterns' study due to its realization through textile technology.

Finally, modeling arises from the combination of these elements to create a composition with a sense of tension. Asakura dubbed the methods of combining these elements as the "formative grammar" of basic art and design, divided into compositions and illusion creation.

This study mainly focuses on Sichuan Qiang traditional costume patterns, and will be conducted using the method of Qualitative Case Study. The collected samples will be analyzed using the purposeful sampling method.

Since this study includes investigating the meanings in texts and visuals, the qualitative method, in which the researcher takes a leading role by being indulged in the research, then best suits this purpose. Qualitative research, emphasizing the exploration of meaning within its contextual setting, necessitates a method that can capture and interpret data's latent significance. Humans, adept at activities like interviewing, observing, and analyzing, are well-equipped for this task, rendering them essential for the proper execution of such research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this study, the traditional costume pattern of Qiang nationality can be regarded as a unit. In the process of studying these patterns, we can collect data through journals, newspapers, magazines, interviews and many other methods. Analyzing this data allows us to create a rich description of Qiang traditional costume patterns.

Research Process

The research sample for this study was gathered from various resources, including libraries such as the Sichuan Library and the University Library in Sichuan. Online databases and search engines, including CNKI, ProQuest, and Google Scholar, were also utilized extensively. Museums with notable collections like the Qiang Museum of MAOXIAN, Sichuan Museum, and the Ethnic Museum of Southwest Minzu University served as primary sources for first-hand data. Additionally, areas inhabited by the Qiang people including Beichuan County, Wenchuan County, and Mao County, were visited for field studies.

The selection of research samples was meticulously carried out using diverse sources. Libraries including the Sichuan Library, and the university library in Sichuan provided a wealth of books, journals, theses, and news articles. Online resources such as CNKI, ProQuest, and Google Scholar were extensively used for academic papers and articles. Valuable insights were gleaned from

museums such as the Qiang Museum of MAOXIAN, which boasts a noteworthy collection of Qiang traditional attire and ethnic craftwork; the Sichuan Museum with its rich cultural relics, including a section dedicated to Qiang costumes; and the Ethnic Museum of Southwest Minzu University, renowned for its abundant collections, high academic level, and a special Qiang exhibition hall. Field studies were conducted in the Qiang-inhabited regions of Beichuan County, Wenchuan County, and Mao County - places rich in Qiang population and cultural significance. In addition to these resources, interviews with subject matter experts were also conducted. Such interviews provided first-hand information, capitalizing on the experts' extensive knowledge and personal experiences. This immersion into individual narratives further enriched the research, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

The data collection methods employed were manifold and included a thorough analysis of documents pertaining to Qiang traditional costume patterns. Observational studies were carried out to understand the shapes, colors, composition, and layout features of patterns. In addition, modern tools like a colorimeter were employed to precisely measure the hues used in these intricate designs. Digital documentation techniques such as video recording and photography were pivotal in recording the details and nuances of the traditional costumes, facilitating in-depth analysis at later stages.

The construction of a database was an essential step in this research. To cater to the specific objectives of the study, different types of data, such as text, images, and tables, were meticulously categorized and assigned unique identifiers for easy accessibility. The database was designed to aid in efficient search and organization of information, enabling a smooth flow of subsequent research activities.

The examination within this research is limited to the intricate patterns found in Sichuan Qiang traditional costumes. This encompasses an in-depth study into the shapes utilized, including the subjects, icons, and forms inherent to these patterns. Attention is further paid to the color characteristics, the substantive elements of composition, and the arrangement characteristics within each piece of clothing. This specific focus allows for a detailed analysis of the costume patterns in their traditional context.

The research findings presented in this paper are somewhat constrained by several limitations. One such limitation being the sampling which is limited to the patterns collected. Given the extensive range of traditional Qiang costume designs, it is highly unlikely that all pattern variations have been captured.

Furthermore, there are notable content restrictions. Throughout the investigation, language communication largely depended on third-party translation. This may have induced certain inaccuracies or misinterpretations in the naming and description of the patterns. Moreover, this

study does not delve into the historical evolution of these patterns nor does it compare these patterns with others from different regions.

Lastly, the research only highlights the traditional Qiang costume patterns within Sichuan province, excluding patterns from the Qiang communities outside this province. Even within Sichuan, our research primarily focused on Mao County, Wenchuan County, and Beichuan County, meaning exploration beyond these counties was not covered. This geographical limitation could potentially exclude relevant patterns and cultural practices.

The three-fold methodology employed in this research includes photographic analysis, text parsing, and data synthesis. Each method played a crucial role in exploring and understanding the Qiang's traditional costume patterns.

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