



# Exploring the Inheritance and Innovation of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage "Yi Embroidery"

**Jiayan Han**

Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, Beijing 100029, China

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**Abstract:** The author explores the inheritance and innovation of China's intangible cultural heritage "Yi Embroidery" based on the conclusion drawn from dozens of Yi Embroidery-related training, the development of nearly one hundred Yi Embroidery products, and in-depth field investigation of the Yi ethnic areas in Liangshan Prefecture, Sichuan Province in the past four years. During the research process, the author witnessed Liangshan Prefecture from poverty alleviation to rural revitalization and deeply explored the techniques of Yi Embroidery, such as Panxian embroidery, Tiebu embroidery, and Guobu embroidery. Furthermore, multidimensional interaction with the government, industries, enterprises, and universities drives product upgrading and cultivates potential students through training while promoting rural economic revitalization. Finally, it laid the foundation of the Yi Embroidery inheritance mode: "Inheritance - knowing where Yi embroidery comes from" and "Innovation - knowing where Yi Embroidery goes." It enables tradition to have a foothold in the modern social economy and glow with vitality and splendor.

**Keywords:** Liangshan Prefecture, Yi Embroidery, intangible cultural heritage, inheritance, innovation, multidimensional interaction

Yi Embroidery is the embroidery of Yi nationality. It is a popular intangible cultural heritage in the Yi region of southwest China that uses red, yellow, and black as the three primary colors of the pattern. Its exquisite craftsmanship and strong color contrast make it characteristic of the nation. In 2008, Yi Embroidery was approved by The State Council to be included in the second batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list.

In the past four years, the author, with the experts of the School of Continuing Education in Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, has carried out dozens of Yi Embroidery training for local civil handicraftsman, developed nearly 100 Yi embroidery products, and conducted in-depth field research in the past four years in the Yi region of Liangshan Prefecture, Sichuan Province. "Inheritance - knowing where Yi embroidery comes from" and "Innovation - knowing where Yi embroidery goes" was come up as the foundation of the Yi Embroidery heritage model. "Inheritance - knowing where Yi embroidery comes from" means understanding the meaning of China's intangible cultural heritage, Yi Embroidery, and ensuring that it is passed on continuously. "Innovation - knowing where Yi embroidery goes" is how to activate Yi Embroidery and transform the income source of handicrafts from "passive blood transfusion" to "self-hematopoiesis." The following two points will be discussed in detail:

## 1. Inheritance — "Know where Yi Embroidery comes from"

### 1.1 The significance of Yi Embroidery intangible cultural heritage inheritance

Every needle and thread is a vein of life; every picture and case is a footprint of the previous generations. The cultural revival of every nation begins by summarizing the rich heritage of its nation. Yi Embroidery is one of the essential decorative techniques of Yi clothing, which embodies the social form, economic production, and lifestyle formed by Yi people for thousands of years. The distribution of Yi people in different regions can be distinguished by combining embroidery colors and techniques. Therefore, Yi Embroidery is a national symbol and a complete national visual identification system, which is the cultural significance of originality inherited by Yi Embroidery.

Second, the Yi Embroidery industry has helped Liangshan prefecture from poverty alleviation to rural revitalization, forming a magnificent cultural industry, which is the critical pillar of poverty eradication in Liangshan Prefecture. According to the development plan for the Yi Embroidery industry in Liangshan Prefecture, an industrial park and ten industrial bases will be built in Liangshan Prefecture by 2020. It can realize an annual output value of 139 million yuan (RMB) in the Yi Embroidery industry, helping about 200,000 women with difficulty achieve flexible employment at home. Furthermore, the "14th Five-year" plan of Liangshan Prefecture emphasizes developing cultural prosperity as a critical project. It is proposed

to display the distinctive ethnic and red culture of Liangshan, create fine arts and culture, and focus on the development of cultural heritage protection and heritage development of Yi culture, which is the political and economic significance of Yi Embroidery heritage culture.

## 1.2 Inheritance methods of Yi embroidery intangible cultural heritage

Compared with the "Four Famous Embroideries" of China, Su Embroidery, Yue Embroidery, Hunan Embroidery, and Shu Embroidery. Yi Embroidery uses the same techniques, no stitches are exposed at the joints, and the stitches are smooth. It is good at incorporating auspiciousness and good wishes into the embroidery products in creation and design. However, the Yi Embroidery has more ethnic characteristics, with red, yellow, and black as the three primary colors. The embroidery thread is usually twisted with multiple strands of yarn before use. Therefore, the thread dimension is thicker than the four famous embroideries, thus forming bold and rough techniques that do not belong to the precise embroidery style. Yi Embroidery, as a handicraft in Liangshan Prefecture, has its strengths and advantages through long-term accumulation and development. After an in-depth investigation of female embroiders and local civil handicraftsman in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, it is concluded that the inheritance of Yi Embroidery in Liangshan Prefecture can be divided into two sections segments:



Figure.1 "Inheritance" — Yi Embroidery research method (Jiayan, 2022)

### 1.2.1 Local civil handicraftsmen

As creators, carriers, and transmitters of intangible cultural heritage, local civil handicraftsmen maintain the vitality of intangible cultural heritage and produce the characteristics of embroidery culture that vary from person to person and region to region. They are the bridge of communication between metaphysics and physics and carry Taoism through skills, allowing intangible cultural heritage to be protected and inherited through practice.

Regarding the inheritance planning of Yi Embroidery handicraftsmen, the first step is implementing the Chinese non-genetic inheritance group research and training plan. Organizing the research, study, and training for inheritors and handicraftsman to help them improve their aesthetic ability, improve the skill level of Yi Embroidery based on adhering to the tradition, and institutionalize, standardize and industrialize the standard of embroidery pieces.

The second is to discover Yi Embroidery enthusiasts, especially the young group. By continuously gathering people who practice intangible cultural heritage, expanding the team of inheritors and handicraftsman to stimulate cultural confidence and enhance their inheritance practice and re-creation ability. It would drive to achieve the goal of cultivating an embroiderer, influencing a family, and driving a group of women to start their own business and increase their income.

### 1.2.2 Spirit of handicraftsman

Yi Embroidery is usually embodied in the form of patterns in costumes, such as the headscarf, hats, pouches, sewing bags, trimming, and other clothing and daily necessities. They are the material carriers that present Yi people's life, survival, reproduction, and development and are concentrated expressions of practical philosophy, aesthetic value, and symbolic identifier.

The concept of "respecting nature and cherishing things" is the first inspiration needed to be inherited. "Panxian" embroidery, the representative craft of Yi Embroidery, involves winding cotton threads process before embroidery, which can be divided into different threads standard according to the size of the target pattern. As the production process of cotton threads is prosperous and complicated, to prevent the waste of excess threads during the embroidery process, the handicraftsman of Yi nationality estimates the length of threads to be used and then cuts them. Even if the estimated line is not long enough, the Yi embroiderer will estimate the length of the thread and cut it off after determining it. They also use the "jointing" technique so that even if the estimated thread is not long enough, the design is not visible as a joint, and the thread is used to its full potential. Another branch of Yi Embroidery is patchwork embroidery, also known as "Buhua Embroidery." This embroidery uses leftover materials to collage and make decorative edges through color combinations and structural

undulations, turning waste material and useless things into treasure, realizing the value of "zero waste" and embodying the Chinese concept of "respecting nature and cherishing things."



Figure 2. Yi Embroidery — Panxian, Tiebu embroidery (Jiayan, 2020)

Secondly, it is confirmed in the ancient books that the Yi ancestors chose the three primary colors of "black, red, and yellow" for the embroidery decoration, which contains the unique aesthetic appreciation of life, nature, religion, and folk customs, as well as the national symbolic color concept, which is a reflection of the aesthetic value of the unity of heaven and man. The pattern of Yi Embroidery must be a closed-loop design pattern so that there is variation in the continuity of the pattern and harmony in contrast. It can be divided into three major categories: natural landscape pattern (mountain pattern, water ripple pattern, sun and moon pattern, cloud pattern, etc.), plant pattern (rapeseed pattern, fern pattern, garlic pattern, etc.), and animal pattern (sheep's horn pattern, rooster's crown pattern, ox's eye pattern, horse's tooth pattern, etc.). These vivid patterns show the Yi people's keen insight, observation, and perception of nature.

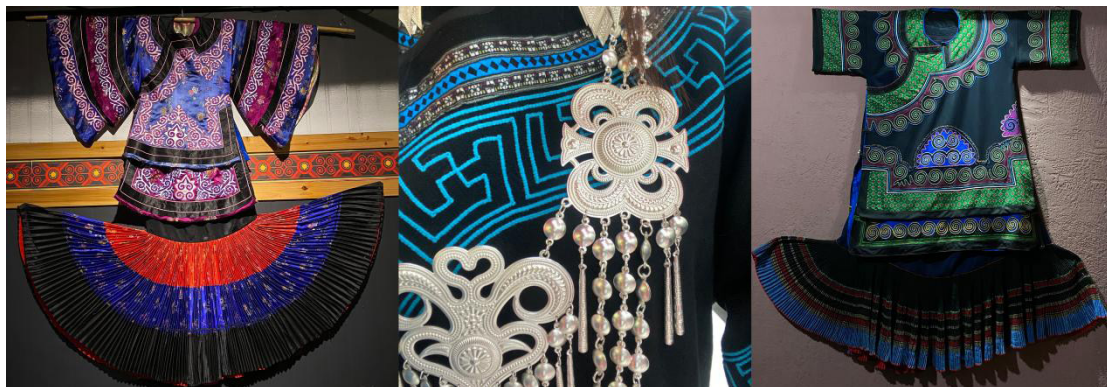


Figure 3. Yi Embroidery pattern — fern pattern, horse's tooth, cloud pattern (Jiayan, 2020)

The Yi embroiderers have been practicing for thousands of years, combining techniques, colors, and patterns to create unforgettable symbols of Yi culture. They use needles instead of pens to draw pictures and use colorful cotton threads to paint colors, forming a dress culture of "different clothes style on both sides rivers and different clothes style on both sides mountains" among Yi ethnic groups. At the same time, the belief in the Yi religion and nature worship is reflected through the combination of patterns and colors. In the context of multiculturalism, mark the boundary between "Yi" and "other 55 ethnic groups", thus maintaining cultural diversity. In addition, Yi Embroidery is a "symbol of female identity," the bright decorative colors during the girlhood, to the quiet and elegant colors of green and purple during the bridal period, until the decorative colors of Yi people in their old age, which are mostly dark colors such as cyan and blue. Thus, it can be seen that embroidery color for Yi women is the marker of lifelong ritual witness.



Figure 4. Yi Embroidery — Female identity (Baidu, 2019)

### 1.3 Challenges of Yi Embroidery intangible Cultural Heritage inheritance

#### 1.3.1 Challenge 1 — "Inheriting the metaphysical culture of Yi Embroidery"

Yi Embroidery is centered on human skills. Human beings are the carrier of implements and the Taoism spirit. Through the mode of conveying Taoism through skills, people can inherit Yi people's artisanal spirit related to "respecting nature and cherish things and uniting nature and man" for thousands of years. This immaterial attribute emphasizes the quality of being independent of material form. How to break through the barriers and limitations of the material form of Yi Embroidery and maintain the immaterial characteristics of "intangible cultural heritage" is a necessary attitude to respect the heritage of our ancestors.

#### 1.3.2 Challenge 2 — "Creating closed-loop mode of production and marketing of Yi Embroidery."

The inheritance of Traditional Handicrafts of Ethnic minorities in China is usually carried on by families. It will soon disappear if Yi Embroidery is separated from its inheritors and handicraftsmen. With the development of modern production, expanding the inheritance team of Yi Embroidery handicrafts and building a multi-person cooperative group system can ensure the completion of batch orders. It is conducive to expanding the benefits efficiency and benefit channels of folk handicrafts in the future. Therefore, it is urgent to create a closed-loop mode of production and marketing for Yi Embroidery.

#### 1.3.3 Challenge 3 — "Avoiding the formalism of Yi Embroidery"

The inheritance and declaration of intangible cultural heritage is not only the need of folk handicraftsmen but also the promotion of local governments. If the purpose is too utilitarian, the research work related to intangible cultural heritage will become local advertising, tourism publicity, value-added channels, and a commercial product of form rather than content. Therefore, based on respecting the cultural connotation of intangible cultural heritage, how to reasonably materialize and modernize is a critical topic in the research.

## 2. Innovation — "Know where Yi Embroidery goes"

### 2.1 The significance of Yi Embroidery's intangible cultural heritage innovation

"Innovation" in this paragraph refers to the "Inheritance with innovation and application" of modern Yi Embroidery. In the process of globalization, the future and destiny of every nation and country are closely linked together, that is, the community of shared future of humanity. Ethnic and cultural diversity has become the carrier of expression of different people's perceptions of the world and their cultural identities.

As the representative of the intangible cultural heritage of Liangshan Prefecture, Yi Embroidery has carried out training for Yi Embroidery artisans to improve their skills, innovative and improved designs for Yi Embroidery derivatives, and opened up a new era of e-commerce and show business for the promotion mode of Yi Embroidery under the multi-dimensional linkage of government, industry, and enterprises. Finally, the intangible cultural heritage will play an essential role in promoting local economic development and rural revitalization by creating "production, learning, research, sales, and exhibition." The innovation and development of Yi Embroidery are related to the great cause of cultural development and national revival in the Liangshan area. Relying on the mode of "Inheritance with innovation and application" can promote the realization of the development strategy of "cultural power."

## 2.2 Innovation methods of Yi Embroidery intangible cultural heritage

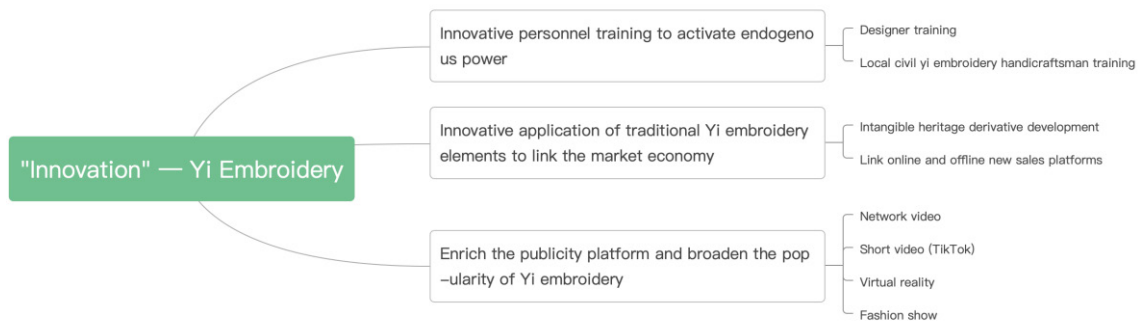


Figure 5. "Innovation" — Yi Embroidery research method (Jiayan, 2022)

The first innovation method for Yi Embroidery's intangible cultural heritage is the innovative training of handicraftsmen and inheritors. From 2019 to 2021, as a team member of the Intangible Cultural Heritage project of the School of Continuing Education of Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, we have carried out several training for Liangshan Prefecture, Xide County, and Yuexi County to improve the skills of Yi Embroidery. It improved the local handicraftsman's techniques of Panxian embroidery, Tiebu embroidery, and Guobu embroidery, as well as the aesthetic appreciation of color and patterns.

It is the first time many handicraftsmen put down the needle, pick up the pen, and begin to paint the draft out of their hearts. The course is from simple to complex, leading handicraftsmen to change their thinking and accept the mode of modern industry customization. At the same time, as an industry design leader, the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology concentrates on training talented designers in the field of fashion design and cultural creativity for the industry. On the road of Yi Embroidery's intangible cultural heritage innovation, craftsmen and designers play their respective roles and interact with each other in multiple ways, laying a good foundation for developing derivative products of Yi Embroidery.

The role of intangible heritage derivatives is that they can "turn conservation into innovation and passivity into the initiative." In 2020, the author, together with experts from the School of Continuing Education of Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, extended the training program to the industry, investigated the intangible cultural heritage of Liangshan Prefecture on the spot, and assisted designers of Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology in developing nearly 100 types of liangshan Yi nationality's intangible cultural heritage Yi Embroidery derivatives, including bags, jewelry, and clothing. The activation of "Yi Embroidery" first needs products and then needs to open online (e-commerce platform, live streaming platform) and offline sales platform (designer collection shop). Continuous order quantity can transform handicraftsman from "passive blood transfusion" to "self-hematopoiesis."



Figure 6. Liangshan Yi nationality's intangible cultural heritage Yi Embroidery derivatives (BIFT, 2020) (Related fashion brand name: Her-time, J.LInN NiCENESS, Yijianzhiwu, YOYOSHARMA)

Intangible cultural heritage never exists in isolation, so the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage should be in line with the trend of The Times. Nowadays, everyone is the director of life, providing a more convenient and broader communication channel for disseminating traditional Yi and embroidery culture. It enhances the audience's participation and makes the recipient of information the cultural disseminator.

The advantage of short video transmission lies in the short time consuming, and wide range. "Liangshanfeiyi (LiangShanFeiYi)," "Sichuanshouyi (SiChuanShouYi)," and "Yirenzaowu (YirenZaoWu)," and other official and private

short video platforms, combining the traditional Yi culture and modern hot spot accumulated millions of thumb up quantities. The most notable effect is that many people who first see the video title do not know how to pronounce the basic characters of "Yi"(Yi) because the Chinese character "Yi"(Yi) is rarely used in the word. But through the influence of short videos, they not only know the "Yi"(Yi) character but also can further understand the local culture and even understand the name of "Charwa," that is a Yi's costume, which is the credit of the media in the new era.

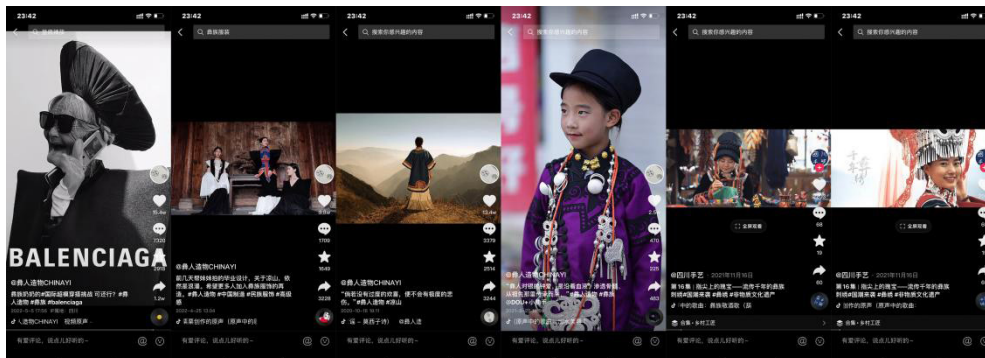


Figure 7. Short video related to Liangshan Yi Embroidery (TikTok, 2022)

In the first "Digital China" Construction Summit, participants in the digital Intangible cultural heritage section can scan AR cards to watch three-dimensional intangible cultural heritage projects on mobile phones. When wearing VR glasses, they can stay in the virtual inheritor's studio and learn intangible heritage skills with the inheritor, narrowing the distance between intangible heritage and the public from the perspective of relationship and emotion.

Besides short videos, AR and VR technologies, Yi Embroidery can also expand its influence through fashion week presentations. In 2020, the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology and the Women's Federation in Liangshan prefecture jointly hosted a fashion show in Beijing. The fashion products are derivative products of Yi Embroidery. Due to the effect of the Novel Coronavirus, most of the audiences could not attend, so the organizer opened the "offline + online" fashion show. The show has promoted the sustainable development of the marketing of derivative products of Yi Embroidery, further enhanced the popularity and influence of Liangshan Yi Embroidery products, and made intangible cultural heritage a lifestyle within people's reach.



Figure 8. Fashion show of derivative products of Yi Embroidery (BIFT, 2020)

## 2.3 Challenges of Yi Embroidery intangible cultural heritage innovation

### 2.3.1 Challenge 1 — "Never forget why we start innovating"

In the process of innovation of derivative products of Yi Embroidery of intangible cultural heritage, we should keep in mind the principle of "two avoidance," "two attention," and "one promotion."

"Two avoidance" means avoiding excessively deepening the stereotyped impression of Yi Embroidery in the design and

avoiding excessively innovating the design, which will run counter to the original cultural spirit.

"Two notes" is to pay attention to the cultural connotation of Yi nationality, strengthen the record and research of traditional clothing, and at the same time pay attention to the rationality of design, actively absorb ancient and modern elements, to complete the reconstruction of contemporary fashion.

"One promotion" means to enhance the cultural confidence of the Yi people, promote the significant development and prosperity of culture, and ensure that Yi Embroidery will not forget its original aspiration due to the power of capital operation.

### 2.3.2 Challenge 2 — "Spreading diversity."

With the rapid development of social media, people tend to lose their aesthetic ability in the network world. The general public does not have a strong sense of responsibility for traditional intangible cultural heritage, so many contents are not interesting to the public and cannot attract audiences. Traditional media gradually develop towards entertainment in video production to improve audience rating and attention. However, it weakens the scientific and educational nature of intangible cultural heritage culture while improving entertainment. Therefore, how to make reasonable use of the public network platform, and give consideration to scientific and educational heritage and innovation, is a challenge for the dissemination of Yi Embroidery.

Promoting the design innovation of Yi Embroidery culture in Liangshan Prefecture of Sichuan province is of great significance to improving the added value of Yi Embroidery culture and meeting the growing cultural needs of the masses. In addition, innovation is also the carrier of inheriting Yi's cultural spirit of "needle and thread" and "implements and Taoism spirit." Never forget why we started, and our mission will be accomplished eventually. Let Yi Embroidery, full of vitality, tell China's stories through needles and threads, and spread China's voice to the world.

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