

The inheritance dilemma and development of contemporary Qiang embroidery

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Abstract

Qiang embroidery is one of the important carriers of Qiang history and culture and was listed on the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2008. With the gradual advancement of urbanization, industrialization, and marketization, the traditional handicraft industry is facing a crisis of transformation. Qiang embroidery was also severely impacted by the Wenchuan earthquake, making its study and protection imperative. Through field investigations in Wenchuan County, where the Qiang ethnic group is concentrated, it was found that although Qiang embroidery has received some protection from the local government, it faces practical difficulties such as a lack of inheritors, weak craft innovation capabilities, and gradual neglect in daily life. Qiang embroidery needs to seize opportunities in the current tourism boom, cultivate more outstanding inheritors, and integrate with modern clothing design, artistic aesthetics, and other fields. This approach will help explore a new development path for Qiang embroidery that combines practicality, artistry, and cultural industry value.

Keywords Qiang embroidery; inheritance and development; artistic value; cultural industry

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1 Introduction

Qiang embroidery, a significant component of Qiang traditional attire, is a deeply rooted cultural practice that has been preserved through generations. As one of the most representative elements of Qiang heritage, it reflects the aesthetic values of Qiang women, closely intertwined with their daily lives, work practices, and social values. The origins of Qiang embroidery are often linked to local legends, such as the story of Kong Ming (Zhuge Liang, a military strategist of the Shu state during the Three Kingdoms period), who is said to have gifted a floral girdle to a Qiang woman,

inspiring her and others to replicate the design. While this tale lacks solid historical evidence, it illustrates the cultural exchange and integration between the Qiang and other ethnic groups that played a pivotal role in the evolution of this craft.

Over centuries, Qiang women have enriched their embroidery practices by incorporating unique techniques and symbols. These practices gradually evolved, blending influences from other ethnic traditions while retaining the distinct elements of Qiang culture. The design, patterns, colors, and materials used in Qiang embroidery not only serve as a means of artistic expression but also act as vessels of cultural transmission, carrying forward the traditions and heritage of the Qiang people.

Qiang embroidery has garnered considerable academic attention, yielding fruitful research results. According to data from the China Knowledge Network (CNN), a search for the keyword “Qiang embroidery” reveals 632 related articles, including 309 academic journals and 51 dissertations. Among these, 29 articles focus specifically on Qiang embroidery, with 19 examining the patterns, 18 exploring the artistic value, and 19 investigating Qiang costumes. Previous research on Qiang embroidery can be divided into two main areas: cultural analysis of Qiang costumes and the inheritance and development of embroidery patterns.

Firstly, studies on Qiang costumes have analyzed the transformation of Qiang embroidery with advancements in productivity and social change. Research into the crocheted floral patterns, the use of specific colors, and the needlework techniques embedded in Qiang embroidery highlights how Qiang people, despite not having a written language, express their history and cultural identity through their clothing and adornments. Qiang embroidery, as part of these traditional costumes, carries rich historical and cultural significance, documenting the hardships and migrations of the Qiang people, earning them the title “the people who wear their history on their bodies” .

Secondly, the pattern analysis and development of Qiang embroidery has been another major research focus. Scholars have examined the visual language of Qiang embroidery, analyzing its geometric, abstract, and pixel-like motifs, which bear similarities to modern design languages. These patterns have been applied to cultural and creative products, hospitality branding, and print advertisements. In addition, to address the challenges of inheritance, researchers have proposed strategies to revitalize Qiang embroidery, such as fostering new generations of inheritors, creating platforms for transmission, expanding market opportunities, promoting cultural development, and enhancing educational efforts.

Currently, the Qiang embroidery market faces significant challenges, as machine-made imitations—often deemed “fake Qiang embroidery”—dominate a large share of the market. This paper seeks to explore how Qiang embroidery can overcome these developmental obstacles. By examining its historical roots, aesthetic principles, patterns, colors, and integration into daily life, this paper argues that Qiang embroidery must strike a balance between preserving traditional culture and embracing innovation to align with contemporary aesthetics and cultural practices.

2 Development Status of Qiang Embroidery

The traditional attire of the Qiang people is primarily composed of long linen shirts, sheepskin vests, head wraps, girdles, and bindings. Both men and women typically wear sheepskin vests (commonly referred to as “Pi Gua Gua”) over their long shirts, with the wool facing inward on sunny days and outward on rainy days to prevent rain. Men’s long shirts extend above the knee, and they typically wear a braided hairstyle wrapped in a Qiang taral, with a belt and leg bindings made from linen or wool. Men usually wear grass shoes, cloth shoes, or cowhide boots, often adorned with coral scythes and knives hung from their waists.

Women’s shirts generally reach the ankles, and the collars are embellished with plum-shaped silver ornaments. The lapels, cuffs, and collar edges are embroidered with lace, while the waist is cinched with an embroidered apron and belt, which is also adorned with floral motifs. Unmarried girls wear plaits and coiffures with embroidered headscarves, while married women wear buns and similarly decorated headscarves. Women also wear “Yunyun Shoes” and favor silver hairpins, earrings, ear drops, collar ornaments, silver plaques, bracelets, rings, and other jewelry.

Qiang embroidery is found in various daily necessities, featuring a rich variety of colors and patterns, distinctive materials, and unique compositions. Qiang women have developed their own interpretations of beauty, expressed through items such as handkerchiefs, belts, vests, collars, shoe uppers, and satchels, which are often adorned with intricate embroidery. These artistic expressions contribute to a localized aesthetic concept that is distinctly Qiang. When practicing Qiang embroidery, women do not adhere strictly to predefined patterns, instead developing their own unique embroidery techniques, resulting in complex and diverse methods such as flat embroidery, barbola, cross-stitch, tying, nabbing, hooking, flat-stitching, and top-stitching. These techniques reflect the innovative spirit and varied aesthetic preferences of Qiang women in relation to their embroidery and culture.

The colors used in Qiang embroidery are equally diverse. While some are vibrant and bold, others maintain a simple and natural style, often influenced by the surrounding natural environment. Each color selected carries specific meaning and cultural significance.

On June 7, 2008, Qiang embroidery was recognized as a traditional folk art in Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province, and was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list. This acknowledgment not only highlighted the cultural significance of Qiang embroidery but also provided an opportunity for the preservation of this traditional art form. However, with the rapid urbanization process, the Qiang people’s traditional way of life, living spaces, and cultural practices have changed dramatically, leading to a decline in the historical prominence of Qiang embroidery in everyday life.

Today, Qiang costumes are often mass-produced in factories rather than hand-made (see Table 1), and the materials used have shifted from traditional natural fibers to synthetic ones. As a result, the intricate craftsmanship of handmade embroidery is gradually disappearing from the market. For example, “Yunyun Shoes,” once made from linen and grass, are now typically crafted from leather. While the shoes worn by women are still often made from linen and leather, men’s

s versions now feature a decorative piece of sheepskin attached to the front. Similarly, traditional Qiang costumes, once made from linen for summer wear, are now often made from cotton, velvet, hemp, acrylic, and fiber.

Historically, Qiang women took pride in creating their own traditional garments, but today, many prefer to rent traditional wedding costumes for special occasions, while opting for low-cost, mass-produced versions in daily life. In both rural and urban areas, most Qiang men now favor modern, fashionable clothing, with only a few wearing traditional wool vests over modern attire. It is rare to see a Qiang man fully dressed in traditional clothing. This shift away from traditional dress reflects broader changes in the Qiang people's lifestyle and cultural values in the face of modernity.

Table 1 Comparison between traditional handmade Qiang embroidery and modern 'fake' Qiang embroidery

	traditional handcraft Qiang embroidery	modern 'fake' Qiang embroidery
Stitching	five main types of stitches, namely picking, hooking, flat, pulling and racking, are used to produce colourful, concave and convex patterns and patterns, which express a rich mood.	Stitching is single, with only one stitch pulled to the end, which is monotonous in its expression of the mood.
Materials	Hand-knitted linen, velvet, cotton thread, etc., the finished product has a more national and simple atmosphere, with distinctive national characteristics.	'fake' Qiang embroidery is roughly the same as traditional Qiang embroidery materials, but it is not refined enough, especially in terms of comfort and the integrity of the patterns, and the whole does not reflect the national characteristics.
overall structure	The colour matching and pattern design of 'Multi-combination' are closely linked, reasonably laid out and integrated with each other.	The phenomenon of 'multi-combination' is serious, with many patterns put together and lacking in wholeness.
color matching	Traditional Qiang embroidery mainly chooses black, white, red, yellow, blue and green, and all the original colours are matched in colour matching, with no gradual colours and strong national characteristics. In particular, the depiction of clouds and crocheted flowers is bright and colourful, with rich layers of colours and a deep and long rhythm.	Taking the most common 'group of flowers like brocade' as an example, its colours are uniform, all are red flowers and green leaves, coupled with the rigidity of the factory production, there is no span of levels, no sense of hierarchy, and no rhythm.
Patterns	Exquisite embroidery is often up to more than 20 kinds of patterns to pick thorns, including many 'flock of sheep to welcome spring' and other complex workmanship, colour is difficult to control the pattern. Simple or complex process in the hands of each embroiderer often embroidery different works, the same pattern can express different meanings.	Factories choose simple patterns to put together in order to reduce costs, so that many beautiful three-dimensional patterns can not be shown in modern products. Firstly, the use of flowers in the products lacks the original historical flavour of Qiang embroidery. Secondly, the national characteristics of Qiang embroidery have been lost in modern crafts, and in the eyes of the local people, it does not seem to be a national thing.

3 The Development Dilemma of Qiang Embroidery

3.1 Gradual Loss of Inheritance

The inheritance of Qiang embroidery is gradually being lost. In traditional Qiang society, embroidery skills were passed down through generations, traditionally through mothers-in-law teaching daughters-in-law and mothers teaching their daughters. Women exchanged embroidery skills, making Qiang embroidery an important emotional bond within the vernacular society. Traditional Qiang wedding customs also required women to make their own wedding clothes, which served as a key criterion for judging a woman's virtue and intelligence. In this context, traditional Qiang embroidery was typically passed down to local women.

However, today's generation of Qiang women, influenced by modern social life, no longer adheres to these traditions and instead pursues diverse lifestyles. Young people, in particular,

are no longer interested in wearing Qiang costumes in their daily lives. Instead, they pursue individuality and diversity in their clothing choices. Furthermore, the number of practitioners of Qiang embroidery is dwindling, and some practitioners were lost in the Wenchuan earthquake, which has further jeopardized the inheritance of this craft. As education develops and social values change in the Qiang region, more women are attending school, which leaves them with little time or energy to systematically learn Qiang embroidery. This has led to a significant loss of talent. In Wenchuan County, which has a population of 87,971, fewer than 30 Qiang embroidery practitioners remain, including two national-level and two provincial-level inheritors.

Local Qiang woman Lv Ping, aged 45, reflected on this situation: “Now that living conditions have improved, many people of my generation have jobs, and Qiang embroidery has become something we do in our spare time. We usually make insoles, wallets, handbags, and embroidered pictures to give to friends and relatives. For us, Qiang embroidery is a cherished tradition, and no matter how society develops, we will not forget it. But my daughter’s generation is different. When they were young, they thought Qiang embroidery was fun to watch, but then they went to school, rarely came back, and if they did, they would either do homework or surf the internet. Now they work, and in their free time, they play games or mahjong with colleagues. I don’t know if they will ever take up Qiang embroidery again, but I think young people today are not interested in it at all, unlike us.”

3.2 Impact of Modern Consumerism

Modern consumer concepts have significantly influenced the perception of Qiang embroidery. Traditionally, Qiang embroidery held practical value, as it provided costumes for family members. Women began learning embroidery at a young age, and their skills were also a measure of their status in the community. Through continuous practice, they developed various patterns, colors, and styles, which gave Qiang embroidery its unique aesthetic. However, as modern commodities and trade have infiltrated Qiang society, the wide variety of clothing styles has reduced the need for traditional embroidery. Families no longer rely on women’s handiwork to meet their clothing needs.

In the past, Qiang women wore traditional costumes for significant events such as the Qiang New Year, weddings, mountain worship ceremonies, funerals, and ritual sacrifices to the Yellow Dragon. Men also expressed their connection to nature through wool vests and sickles. Over time, however, many Qiang people have integrated into a more diverse culture, putting traditional customs at risk of disappearance. Today, traditional festivals and customs are often presented as tourist performances, while industrialized products have replaced handmade crafts, contributing to the decline of ethnic culture. Most individuals who can still demonstrate Qiang culture are over fifty years old.

An investigation revealed that only two Qiang embroidery outlets remain in Wenchuan County: one in the county town and the other in Yanmen Town. The outlet in the county town sells factory-produced tourist products, including Qiang costumes, scented capsules, and cross-stitch kits. This shop is run by a Han Chinese woman who married into the county, and

she admitted that her business relies on selling tourism products because expensive handmade Qiang costumes are not popular with tourists. In Yanmen Township, Chen Zhixian, a 71-year-old Qiang man, co-runs a shop specializing in handmade Qiang embroidery in partnership with the village committee, helping local villagers sell their embroidery directly. Despite these efforts, in areas like the Aba Qiang and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, where the Qiang population is relatively concentrated, the demand for traditional Qiang embroidery remains low. As a result, traditional Qiang embroidery is no longer a necessity, and modern consumer choices have further diminished its cultural significance.

3.3 Changing Aesthetic Values

The diversified trend of modern aesthetics has also impacted traditional Qiang embroidery. Most decorative patterns and colors in Qiang embroidery originate from the Qiang people's natural environment. Examples include sheep horn patterns, white clouds, and cuckoo birds. The colors in Qiang embroidery are bold and simple, with red, blue, yellow, and white frequently used to create a vibrant style. These designs reflect the Qiang people's connection to nature, their religious beliefs, and their aesthetic pursuits.

While modern aesthetic concepts can accommodate traditional designs, the influx of modern clothing styles has marginalized the traditional Qiang aesthetic. Qiang costumes have lost their popularity, as sports shoes have replaced 'Yunyun Shoes,' and lightweight down jackets have supplanted wool vests. Although the local government has made efforts to protect Qiang embroidery, its inheritance continues to face many challenges. The key to the future of Qiang embroidery lies in finding ways to help local people reconnect with the craft and appreciate its significance in modern society.

4 The New Development Path of Qiang Embroidery

Qiang embroidery has become a representative traditional culture of the Qiang people. It holds an irreplaceable role in their history and life, carrying many symbolic meanings. The reason why Qiang embroidery is facing a crisis of inheritance nowadays is that its value to the local society has not been deeply explored and is therefore considered 'dispensable.' Thus, it is necessary to reshape the contemporary value of Qiang embroidery and explore a new development path. Inheritors, products, and industrialisation are undoubtedly key aspects for the inheritance and development of contemporary Qiang embroidery.

4.1 Cultivating Full-time Inheritors

At present, more and more young people in Qiang society want to leave their homeland and pursue a better life, resulting in a declining number of Qiang embroidery inheritors. Most village families also hope their children will go to the city for better education and employment, rendering it increasingly irrelevant whether women master embroidery skills. The traditional handicraft of Qiang embroidery is seen by many Qiang people as no longer valuable or aligned

with modern social trends. Therefore, changing local perceptions and retaining inheritors is crucial for the sustainable development of Qiang embroidery.

Firstly, creating a new production and management model involving cooperatives, non-genetic inheritors, and embroiderers is essential. Currently, in the context of rural revitalisation, industrial revitalisation has become key to economic development in Wenchuan County. However, ethnic areas face restrictions such as geography, environment, history, and culture, making the industrialisation of familiar traditional handicrafts the preferred choice. The cooperative comprehensively organises the production and sale of Qiang embroidery, with inheritors of intangible cultural heritage providing technical guidance and peasant women producing the products. This model ensures that locals gain practical benefits from Qiang embroidery, helping cultivate full-time Qiang embroidery inheritors and allowing locals to earn money while staying in their hometowns.

Secondly, government leadership and social participation are necessary. Relevant government departments should actively explore effective ways to revitalise traditional crafts in conjunction with cultural development, precision poverty alleviation, rural construction, and tourism. The process of cultivating full-time inheritors requires active participation from government departments. Wenchuan County's Social Security Bureau, Culture and Tourism Bureau, and other relevant departments should provide policy and financial support for Qiang embroidery skills training, product design, and cultural promotion. They should also open a 'green channel' for the development of Qiang embroidery-related industries and establish platforms to cultivate full-time Qiang embroidery inheritors.

In 2014, with government support, Li Xingxiu created the Sichuan Xingxiu Tibetan and Qiang Cultural Crafts Company. She has taught free Qiang embroidery at seven production bases in Wenchuan, Lixian, Xiaojin, Songpan, and Jiuzhaigou, as well as to Qiang embroidery enthusiasts in Maoxian County, Maerkang City (Aba Prefecture), Kanding City (Ganzi Prefecture), and other areas. Her teachings include Qiang costumes, Qiang embroidery, Tibetan and Qiang embroidery, paper-cutting, and more. Li Xingxiu has trained 24 senior embroiderers, trained more than 20,000 people, created employment for over 200 individuals, and helped more than 80 poor families achieve poverty alleviation through Qiang embroidery. She is actively expanding new production bases in Wenchuan, Li County, Xiaojin, Songpan, and Jiuzhaigou. Additionally, she has personally written vocational training materials, such as *Qiang Embroidery, Hand Embroidery Maker (Beginner Level)*, and *Hand Embroidery Maker (Intermediate and Advanced Level)*, specifically for Qiang embroidery training.

Thirdly, organising a series of activities to bring intangible cultural heritage into schools and jointly pass on outstanding traditional culture is important. The heritage of Qiang embroidery needs to be emphasised in school education. The foundation of Qiang embroidery's protection is education, and the hope for its development also lies in education. It is through education that excellent talents in costume design, production, and sales can be cultivated, leading Qiang embroidery inheritors toward specialisation.

Wenchuan County places great importance on introducing intangible cultural heritage into

schools. Thirteen primary and secondary schools in the county have opened Qiang embroidery art courses, including Wenchuan First Primary School, Sichuan Province Weizhou National Normal School Affiliated Primary School (also known as Wenchuan's second primary school), Caopo Primary School, Wolong Town Centre Primary School, Yanmen Primary School, Mianwu Amphibious Primary School, and Yingxiu Primary School. Secondary schools offering these courses include Wenchuan Middle School, Mianwu Amphibious Secondary School, Yingxiu Middle School, Xuankou Middle School, Shuimo Middle School, and Wolong Special Zone Gengda Consistent School. The Qiang embroidery art course is a compulsory subject within Wenchuan County's nine-year compulsory education program, with teaching content based on the *Qiang Embroidery Teaching Materials*, jointly published by Li Xingxiu and the Office of the Leading Group of Aba Prefecture's Labour Development of Both Migrant Workers in November 2016.

4.2 Innovative Development of Diversified Qiang Embroidery Products

Qiang embroidery has the potential to meet the cultural and aesthetic demands of contemporary people. Its patterns, colors, and compositions contain elements aligning with global aesthetic concepts, which local people need to explore further in line with modern trends.

On the one hand, most of the current Qiang embroidery is confined to the uninnovative inheritance of traditional techniques, failing to integrate with contemporary fashion trends. This has resulted in a limited market share for Qiang embroidery products. On the other hand, modern industrially produced Qiang embroidery gradually detaches from the cultural essence of traditional Qiang embroidery, often blindly catering to current fashion trends.

Based on this phenomenon, the value of Qiang embroidery should go beyond its traditional practical value, retaining key features such as color, composition, and cultural symbols, while pursuing products with contemporary artistic aesthetics. This approach will satisfy the cultural needs of contemporary society and showcase the unique charm of traditional Qiang embroidery (as shown in the figure).

For example, the innovative development of Qiang embroidery can result in garments that possess international fashion appeal by combining modernity and tradition. Additionally, branded satchels featuring Qiang embroidery characteristics can be developed. Furthermore, Qiang embroidery elements can be incorporated into decoration, furniture, and various daily necessities, creating distinctive products.

The diversification of Qiang embroidery products can stimulate the innovation capacity of local people and encourage greater participation, which is of great significance for the development and sustainability of Qiang embroidery.

4.3 Formation of the Qiang Embroidery Industry System Relying on Tourism

In recent years, tourism in the Qiang region has developed rapidly. Famous sites such as Shuimo Ancient Town, the "Radish Walled City" (commonly known as the Qiang Village on the Clouds),



a. Traditional Money Pouch



b. Innovative Money Pouch



c. Traditional Apron



d. Innovative Apron



e. Traditional Shoulder Bag



f. Innovative Shoulder Bag

Sources: a. 360 Images b.360 Images c. Beihai 365 Forum d. Photographed by project team members e. the opening ceremony of the movie *The Embroiderer on the Cloud* f. 360 Images

Figure 1: Qiang Embroidery Patterns

and the renowned Wolong Panda Protection Base attract tourists from all over the country to experience Qiang culture and local customs. In addition to enjoying the visual aesthetics, tourists also seek physical objects to express their admiration and love for Qiang culture. Among the many local cultural products, Qiang embroidery is often the first choice for tourists, providing an intuitive cultural experience as a tangible artifact.

However, the current Qiang embroidery industry has not systematised the processes of product design, production, processing, and sales. Government departments and the private sector have yet to establish an effective cooperation mechanism. Often, the private Qiang embroidery industry operates in isolation, and cultural promotion efforts by government departments lack integration with traditional folk crafts.

For instance, Shuimo Ancient Town, with its beautiful natural scenery, characteristic ancient town architecture, and proximity to Chengdu (just over an hour's drive), has experienced rapid tourism development in recent years. During the first four days of National Day 2021, the town saw over 65,000 tourists. Other popular tourist spots in the region include the ruins of Yingxiu Earthquake and Jiangwei City. Shuimo Ancient Town is known as the "Little Jiangnan

of Sichuan” and a “Famous Town of Tibetan and Qiang Culture.” Every street in the town sells cultural specialties, mainly Qiang embroidery, thangka, and other ethnic products.

Despite this, the high prices of handicraft products have limited their popularity among foreign tourists, leading to low sales of Qiang embroidery. Through field investigations and visits to specialty product shops in tourist areas, it was found that shopkeepers mainly sell moderately priced specialty foods and inexpensive cultural trinkets as their primary source of income. Authentic Qiang cultural items, which truly reflect Qiang culture, such as scented bags, wallets, mobile phone cases, pajamas, tableware, pillowcases, toys, shoe insoles, and hangings, are rarely found in the market. These items, with their simple, pure, and exquisite traditional craftsmanship, differ significantly from mass-produced tourist souvenirs, which are often colourful but crudely made.

To fundamentally change the current development predicament of Qiang embroidery, the opportunity presented by the rapid growth of local tourism should be seized. It is necessary to advocate for a long-term cooperation mechanism between the government and the private sector to promote more cost-effective and trendy Qiang embroidery products to the market.

As locals who grew up in the Qiang region, many Qiang people feel that their daily-use embroidered items, which have never entered the market, are far superior to the “fake Qiang embroidery” available commercially. They believe that even the shopping bags at home, which often feature simple but exquisite national patterns such as flower clusters and sheep’s head flowers, are better than the unorthodox Qiang embroidery products sold in stores. These environmentally friendly, practical, and affordable products, with their national characteristics, have greater appeal to foreign tourists.

Therefore, the systematic development of the Qiang embroidery industry should not only rely on the government and the market to build a platform but also require innovation from the private sector. This innovation must occur while protecting traditional crafts and aligning with market demands. The systematic development of the Qiang embroidery industry will continue to inject vitality into Qiang cultural tourism and further establish a diversified employment model for the local workforce, as well as a cultivation path for Qiang embroidery talents.

5 Conclusion

As an important carrier of Qiang culture, Qiang embroidery encapsulates the history, traditions, and religious beliefs of the Qiang people. It is a concentrated reflection of both the material and spiritual life of Qiang society and holds significant historical, cultural, artistic, social, and commercial value. Today, the challenges faced by Qiang embroidery stem from societal development, and the solution lies in adapting to these changes. The exploration of the inheritance and industrialisation of Qiang embroidery represents both the protection and innovation of traditional Qiang culture. It is also a vital path for the Qiang people to explore new directions for Qiang embroidery in the context of modern social development.

At present, nearly all traditional ethnic cultures are facing similar challenges to those faced by

Qiang embroidery. This requires local communities to find suitable environments for the growth and development of traditional handicrafts as they continuously adapt to modern social life. In the case of Qiang embroidery, the modernisation of traditional handicrafts must be integrated with the development of the tourism industry. This integration aims to satisfy both the material and cultural needs of the people.

As the state and society place increasing importance on the protection and preservation of minority cultures, the inheritance, protection, and development of ethnic cultures become ever more crucial. This is also the significance of focusing on Qiang embroidery in this paper.

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