

Study on the Inheritance and Innovation of Traditional Chinese Culture—Taking Yichun Summer Cloth as an Example

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Abstract

The Summer Cloth craft is a traditional artistry passed down by Chinese ancestors, embodies the wisdom of Chinese forebears. Yichun Summer Cloth, particularly Wanzai Summer Cloth (Wanzai is a town of Yichun city), carries profound historical roots and unique cultural significance, standing as a representative of Chinese traditional textile heritage. Once honored as tribute items to the emperor, this cloth played a vital role in boosting Yichun's economy but now it is facing the peril of extinction. This study traces the historical development of Yichun's Summer Cloth industry through field research, evaluates its current status, and draws inspiration from the growth trajectories of Rongchang Summer Cloth and Fenyi Summer Cloth. By leveraging local advantages, it proposes actionable strategies for heritage preservation and innovative development.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese Culture, Yichun Summer Cloth, Sustainable Development

The Development History of Yichun Summer Cloth

Summer Cloth, also known as "Ramie Cloth", "Raw Cloth", or "Crow Cloth", is a type of plain and twill woven fabric made from ramie plant fibers. Historical records state: "In ancient times, people first used ramie for cloth-making. Cotton was not introduced to China until the Yuan Dynasty, which was unprecedented in antiquity." All garments made with this material ranged from ceremonial robes to everyday grass garments. Ramie-based Summer Cloth has coexisted with silk textiles since the time of the Huang Emperor. Praised for its natural simplicity, rugged texture, breathability, and antibacterial properties, Summer Cloth got its name due to its suitability for summer wear. In 2008, the traditional craftsmanship of Summer Cloth

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production was officially listed as part of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage protection program.

Jiangxi Summer Cloth boasts a long and storied history. In 1979-1980, archaeologists unearthed ramie printed fabrics at the Longhu Mountain tomb complex in Guixi, Jiangxi. Dating back to the late Spring and Autumn Period to early Warring States era, these textiles represent the earliest known ramie printed fabrics discovered in China. The exquisite craftsmanship and intricate weaving techniques showcased the remarkable textile skills of Jiangxi's ancient inhabitants. As noted in Huang Yuanyu's *Methods of Ramie Planting in the Qing Dynasty* treatise: "Yuzhang's ramie cloth weaving is unparalleled in the world" (Qian Guicheng, 2008). A local proverb states: "Jiangxi's three treasures are Wanzai Summer Cloth, Nanfeng oranges, and Jingdezhen Porcelain." Wu Zongci's draft of Jiangxi General Gazetteer records: "Jiangxi's second specialty is Summer Cloth, it has long been renowned worldwide... Among its production areas, Wanzai, Yichun, and Yihuang counties are most celebrated, with Wanzai ramie cloth being the supreme example." Due to its superior quality, Wanzai Summer Cloth became the collective name for Yichun's ramie industry. Summer Cloth was listed as a tribute item during the Tang Dynasty, documented in the *New Book of Tang: Geography Chapter*: "Yuanzhou's Yichun Commandery presented white ramie cloth as tribute." (Qian Guicheng, 2008) During the Ming Dynasty, Wanzai Summer Cloth industry flourished, with about 70% of households in Wanzai County engaged in or part-time ramie production by the late Ming Dynasty period, and over a hundred local businesses operating ramie workshops. By the Qing Dynasty, nearly 10,000 people were involved in ramie production in Wanzai County. From the late Qing to early Republican era, Yichun County had 300 merchants, including 10 ramie businesses. Wanzai County boasted over a thousand ramie workshops and nearly twenty specialized trading houses. Yichun Summer Cloth was sold all over the country and some were exported overseas. "This is how three-quarters of the population make a living", and it became the main pillar of regional economic development. In the 1930s, as foreign markets were lost, the market for Summer Cloth gradually declined.

The Development Difficulties of Yichun Summer Cloth

Since the founding of The Republic of China, Yichun's Summer Cloth industry has maintained a steady upward trajectory. The rural household contract responsibility system liberated labor resources in rural areas, while the Reform and Opening-Up Policies fully stimulated market vitality. During the 1990s, Yichun Summer Cloth experienced a brief period of prosperity. "Seven Summer Cloth markets were established in Sanyang, Hongtang, Jinrui, Zhaixia, and Nanmu townships of Yuanzhou District. The number of looms in the district surged from 100 in 1979 to 12,000 by 1990, representing a 12.01-fold increase. Over 10,000 specialized households operated Summer Cloth businesses, accounting for more than 10% of the city's total income. More than 1,200 households engaged in Summer Cloth production, with annual transactions exceeding 50 million yuan and tax revenue surpassing 8 million yuan. Approximately 8,000 households in the city relied on ramie cloth for livelihood." (Lai Zhanjun, Pan Qihui, 2002) The sound of looms echoed continuously across Yichun's townships. In Yuanzhou District alone, over 10 towns engaged in Summer Cloth production, with more than 100,000 people involved in planting, processing, and trading ramie. Elderly men planted and processed ramie, women spun yarn, young adults combed and starched the fibers, while middle-aged men wove cloth. A skilled laborer could produce one bolt of fabric every two days, carrying it to marketplaces during fairs for trade. Sanyang Town became the

largest ramie cloth trading hub in the province. By the late 20th century, Yichun's ramie cloth market had transformed into a bustling commercial scene.

Since the beginning of the new century, the market demand for handicraft products has been shrinking due to the strong impact of mechanized mass production, making it difficult to realize the economic value it deserves. Handicraft skills were once on the verge of being lost, and craftsmen have also changed their careers. The Summer Cloth industry is facing unprecedented difficulties, mainly from the following four aspects:

Shrinking Market Demand

With the advent of the mechanized industrial era, more and more cheap fiber products are flooding the domestic market. Compared with ramie products, cotton products and chemical fibers are not only cheap, but also suitable for large-scale mechanized production, with rich product styles and product comfort that is no less than Summer Cloth. Therefore, the domestic market was quickly occupied by a variety of textiles. The market for handmade Summer Cloth was severely squeezed.

Loss of Employees

With the acceleration of urbanization, a large number of rural laborers have rapidly lost their jobs, and many villages have become "left-behind villages" or even "ghost villages". In the 1980s and 1990s, each household in Hetang Village, Hongtang Town, Yuanzhou District had an average of one loom, and every household planted ramie and wove Summer Cloth. Today, there is only one elderly man in his 80s who is still spinning yarn in the village, and all the ramie fields are abandoned. A Summer Cloth trading street in Hongtang Town is now deserted. According to Mr. Zhong, a Summer Cloth merchant in Hongtang Town, he could collect hundreds of pieces of Summer Cloth every day at the end of the last century, but now he can only collect hundreds of pieces a month. Many Summer Cloth merchants have switched to other jobs. Mabu Township, Shuangqiao Township and Bailiang Township in Wanzai County are important production areas of Wanzai Summer Cloth. At the end of the last century, every household in these villages was engaged in Summer Cloth production. Today, the only places in Wanzai County that make Summer Cloth are Huangcun, Daitang Village and Qiantang Village in Mabu Township, and the only craftsmen who make Summer Cloth are elderly people in their 50s, 60s and even 70s. There are almost no young people willing to make Summer Cloth, and the Summer Cloth craft is on the verge of bankruptcy.

Backward Production Technology

The decline of Yichun Summer Cloth industry is directly related to the large-scale loss of rural labor after the reform and opening up, but the fundamental reason lies in the backward production technology that cannot adapt to the needs of the times. On the one hand, because the warp and weft of traditional Summer Cloth are twisted by hand, they are very easy to break, and machines cannot successfully complete weaving. The weaving cost is much higher than that of machine-made cotton textiles; on the other hand, the biological degumming and printing and dyeing technology of Summer Cloth in my country is not mature enough, and the clothes made from them feel itchy when worn, fade easily, and are far less comfortable and soft than cotton fabrics. For the above reasons, the Yichun Summer Cloth industry can only rely on grey cloth orders from some foreign customers to survive. This form of trade that relies entirely on export to earn foreign exchange has a small market and too many variables. Once

an economic crisis, war, or economic sanctions caused by political conflicts between countries occur, orders may be terminated at any time. Weaving is difficult and costly, but the added value is low, the income of practitioners is not high, and there are too many unstable factors in the industry, which seriously affects the inheritance and development of Summer Cloth craftsmanship.

Backward Production Methods

The earliest production method of Yichun Summer Cloth was self-sufficient production by farmers. From planting ramie, harvesting ramie, retting ramie to spinning yarn, winding yarn, and then sizing yarn, weaving cloth, a family completed dozens of processes. The production efficiency is low, the products are uneven, and there is a lot of randomness. Since the beginning of the new century, the production method of Summer Cloth has improved to a certain extent. But it is still a traditional decentralized production with farmers as the basic unit. Generally, the trading company places an order with the Summer Cloth merchants in the town, and the Summer Cloth merchants distribute the orders to the growers. The collected ramie is then distributed to the spinning households, and the spinning yarn is distributed to the sizing and brushing workers, and the brushed cloth is distributed to the weavers. The weavers weave the cloth according to the requirements, and the Summer Cloth merchants collect the cloth and hand it over to the trading company. Although the entire production chain is more complete than in the past, most trading companies are only agents of grey cloth, responsible for collecting and exporting grey cloth, lacking unified management and deep processing technology research and development.

The Protection and Inheritance of Yichun Summer Cloth

Taking the Path of Industrialization to Create a New Situation

"Agricultural industrialization is a broad avenue to promote the modernization of agriculture, achieve 'two transformations', solve many contradictions in the agricultural and industrial circulation sectors, enhance the organizational level of economic efficiency, and realize increases in production, income, and profit"(Lai Zhanjun, Pan Qihui, 2002). Although Yichun's Summer Cloth industry has shifted from self-sufficient production at home to a more organized approach led by Summer Cloth merchants who provide tools and raw materials and refine labor division, it remains small in scale, poorly managed, and struggling to gain traction. According to my research, there are more than a dozen Summer Cloth factories in Yichun city, of which 80% are small workshops run by Summer Cloth merchants, responsible for organizing Summer Cloth production and collecting grey cloth. Only two or three of these factories possess printing and dyeing technology and processing capabilities, with most engaging in small-scale production. Jiangxi Jingzhu Industrial Co., Ltd. has achieved industrialized production of Summer Cloth. This company originated from Yichun Ramie Textile Factory, established in 1984, and was restructured into Jiangxi Jingzhu Industrial Co., Ltd. in 2005. The company owns a ramie base, grows uniform and high-quality ramie to ensure high-quality raw materials. It has introduced advanced foreign biological degumming technology and ecological clothing high-tech to transform traditional industries and vigorously develop deep processing of Summer Cloth. Its business scope includes research, production, and sales of products such as clothing and accessories, bedding, daily necessities, automotive decor, gifts, and office supplies. Jingzhu Industrial is committed to developing deep processing of Summer Cloth, extending and optimizing the ramie industry chain, and promoting the large-scale, industrialized production of Yichun's ramie industry. The industrialization path can not only

standardize Summer Cloth production, improve product quality, and enhance the added value and market share of Summer Cloth but also create job opportunities, invigorate local economic development, and hold significant relevance for optimizing the agricultural industry structure.

Establish Brand Awareness and Enhance Core Competitiveness

A brand is the business card of a product; it is not just a simple logo or a catchy name, but more importantly, it represents the quality, reputation, and intangible assets of the product. Currently, the 'Rongchang Summer Fabric' produced in Rongchang, Sichuan, is renowned both domestically and internationally. On February 1, 2017, Chinese designer Zhang Chao showcased original designs using 'Rongchang Summer Fabric' at the fashion art exhibition 'China Contemplates: A Journey in Fashion' in Perth, Australia, allowing the charm of Chinese brand culture to shine overseas. The city of Fenyi in Jiangxi has created summer fabric brands such as 'Xinda', 'Enda', and 'Haixing', which have increased the brand's visibility and promoted the development of the summer fabric industry. Although the Yichun summer fabric industry has the 'Jingzhu' brand, to secure a place in domestic and international markets, there is a need to further expand operational scale, standardize production processes, and innovate production technologies. Establishing a brand can drive the industrialization of summer fabric, enhance corporate profitability, and increase farmers' income. Government intervention and support are essential in cultivating summer fabric brands. Family-run operations and small workshops in towns have limited funds and poor dynamism, lacking the ability to independently cultivate summer fabric brands. Only when government leaders at all levels view this from the perspective of regional economic strategy and provide vigorous support and coordinated arrangements, offering policy support in terms of human, material, and financial resources, can more and better summer fabric brands be cultivated. To develop the summer fabric industry, the Rongchang County Government in Sichuan has not only supported manufacturing materials and techniques but has also invested considerable effort in talent cultivation. In 2011, the county cooperated with Xi'an University of Engineering to establish a summer fabric technology inheritance center to teach skills to inheritors of summer fabric. In 2015, the Ministry of Culture held the 'Training Program for Inheritors of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage' at Tsinghua University, providing an excellent opportunity for the inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage.

Combining Zen Buddhism Culture to Create Unique Tourism Characteristics

The origins of Yichun Zen Buddhist culture are deep and long-lasting. According to the Yuanzhou Gazetteer, Zen Buddhist culture is described as "the flower blooms with five leaves, three leaves are in Yichun"; the Weiyang, Caodong, and Linji schools all originated from Yichun. In Yichun, Zen Buddhist temples can be seen nestled in the mountains, making Zen Buddhist culture a tourism highlight for the area. Zen incorporates Daoist concepts of 'nature' to interpret human life and nature. Thus, Zen practitioners seek to live in the natural beauty of green hills and waters, experiencing the joy of Zen, and finding enlightenment in the ever-changing flow of life, ultimately achieving transcendence and spiritual freedom. The natural and simple style of hemp fabric aligns with the principles advocated by Yichun's Zen. Yichun is situated in a hilly region with a climate suitable for ramie cultivation, and hemp fabric is sourced locally. From planting to garment production, everything is done by hand, infused with the laborer's emotions. Although ramie products may appear coarser than cotton, they convey the craftsmanship of hands without any marks of machinery. As handmade items,

every piece of ramie fabric has its own unique texture. Yichun ramie is 'light as silk', and ramie clothing is loose, allowing the body ample freedom. These characteristics of hemp are in harmony with Zen Buddhist culture. Therefore, the author believes that hemp can be developed as a unique aspect of Yichun's tourism culture. First, we can establish a 'Ramie Exhibition Hall' during the cultural tourism festival to bring 'Ramie' into the public eye. Then, we can set up 'Ramie Experience Stores' around cultural tourism scenic spots and Zen Buddhist temples, turning ramie into local souvenirs so that more tourists can experience, understand, and purchase hemp products. Thirdly, we can also build a Yichun tourism website that includes ramie as one of its sections to promote hemp and its craftsmanship online.

Improve Production Techniques to Keep Ancient Arts Alive Today

In the era of mass mechanical manufacturing, while people enjoy the cost-effectiveness and quality of mechanical reproductions, they are gradually growing weary of the rigidity and complexity of molded products. Instead, they are increasingly favoring the simplicity and cultural value of handmade products. Even in developed countries, many high-end quality goods are costly handcrafted items. Japanese brands like 'Muji' and 'alacrity a +koloni' promote handmade linen products that create minimalist and comfortable items, appealing to the modern lifestyle philosophy. Yichun's Summer Cloth boasts excellent raw materials and mature traditional craftsmanship. With appropriate improvements in the production techniques of Summer Cloth, products can resonate with the modern tendency to return to simplicity, enabling this ancient art to thrive vibrantly in contemporary times. Some small Summer Cloth manufacturers in Yichun are already making attempts in this area, processing Summer Cloth into various household items, decorative items, kitchen cleaning cloths, fabrics for traditional landscape painting, daily necessities, and crafts, such as door curtains, window curtains, bed sheets, bed covers, sofa fabrics, cushions, seat pads, tablecloths, wall hangings, lampshades, table runners, placemats, coasters, bathing cloths, dishcloths, gloves, hats, scarves, insoles, slippers, luggage, lighting, traditional paintings, wall hangings, and folding screens.

Conclusion

Traditional Summer Cloth craftsmanship is a precious heritage left by the ancestors of the Chinese nation. It not only records the changes in people's lives over thousands of years but also serves as a vehicle for the local material and spiritual culture. Protecting this technique is an important way to pass on the national spirit and emotions. Based on the present, through the perspective of modern people, using modern technology and thinking to create and reinterpret traditional Summer Cloth craftsmanship is the mission of every modern Chinese. Taking Yichun ramie cloth as an example, this study deeply analyzes its development challenges and proposes strategies such as industrialization, brand building, cultural integration, and process improvement, which have important theoretical and practical significance.

In terms of theory, this study enriches the theoretical system of intangible cultural heritage protection and inheritance, providing new ideas and methods for the sustainable development of traditional handicrafts. By conducting an in-depth analysis of Yichun ramie cloth, it reveals the common problems faced by traditional handicrafts in modern society and offers useful references for related research.

In terms of practice, this study provides feasible strategies for the protection and inheritance of Yichun ramie cloth. Industrialization can standardize production, enhance product quality and added value; brand building helps to strengthen market competitiveness and drive local economic development; cultural integration and process improvement enable Yichun ramie cloth to better meet modern demands and achieve sustainable development. The implementation of these strategies will not only help to save this traditional skill but also provide references for the protection and inheritance of other intangible cultural heritages, promoting the revitalization of traditional culture in modern society.

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