

Master Yang: Protecting Cultural Heritage, Continuing the Tradition

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Abstract

Purpose: *This project examines one Sichuan county's situation and a woman's six-year journey to improve the livelihoods of village families devastated by the Great Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008.*

Design/methodology/approach: *The case uses personal interviews to explain Master Yang's entrepreneurial efforts to help families in Wenchuan County, Sichuan Province, China.*

Findings: *Although Master Yang's embroidery center provides a source of income to the earthquake region's families, Master Yang faces a new challenge: how to preserve an ethnic tradition in the face of changing interests and values.*

Originality/value: *Master Yang's experience offers a model for others facing a loss of income because of natural disaster or displacement. Her reliance on available human and financial resources provides a path to restore monetary and social capital for devastated families.*

Keywords: Qiang ethnic group, rural entrepreneurship, traditional handcrafts, Wenchuan County, 2008 earthquake

Setting the Stage

According to those who were there, Monday, May 12, 2008, started like most late spring days in Sichuan province. It was a sunny and warm day. but at 2:28pm a massive earthquake – now known as the Great Wenchuan Earthquake – struck Sichuan province. This paper examines one Sichuan county's situation and a woman's six-year journey to improve the livelihoods of village families devastated by the Great Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008. Along the way, keep in mind the following questions: Where does the responsibility to promote continuation of cultural traditions rest? Is it with individuals such as Yang and Wang? Alternatively, should provincial and central government bodies provide the means to protect it? Is designating a handcraft or naming someone a master craftsman sufficient? Should teaching and passing down the traditions be in the hands of the private or public sphere?

14:28

According to those who were there, Monday, May 12, 2008, started like most spring days in Sichuan province. It was a sunny and warm day. Adults went to work, students to school, and retirees to the market or a local park to drink tea and play majiang. One young university professor from Chengdu had just picked up his new car from the dealership and drove it to the nearby METRO shopping center, parking it in the parking garage while he shopped for groceries.

But at 14:28 (2:28pm) a massive earthquake now referred to as the Great Wenchuan Earthquake struck Sichuan province. Situated more than 90 kilometers (57 miles) from the epicenter, residents of the provincial capital Chengdu experienced a violent shaking of the earth for between two and four minutes. Closer to the epicenter, in the Niuniangou Valley, the ground didn't stop moving for more than five minutes.

Eventually the 7.9 magnitude earthquake, emanating from 19 km (12 miles) beneath the ground in Wenchuan County, Yingxiu Town [1], would be responsible for killing almost 90,000 people and leaving homeless close to 5,000,000 [2] residents of Sichuan and adjoining provinces.

Millions of people lost their homes, farms, places of work, schools, and centers of social gathering. Although the infamous 1976 Tangshan earthquake killed almost three times as many Chinese (more than 242,000 victims) and left nearly 800,000 people injured [3] with untold numbers homeless, news about the Wenchuan temblor was much more widely disseminated around the world. Less than five hours after the disaster, one of the authors recalls waking up in Ohio on the morning of May 12 to the tragic news reported on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition*.

In the weeks that followed, international and Chinese mass media, social media, and the Internet provided ongoing coverage of the disaster. Gruesome images and stories of bravery and tragedy were delivered to people across China and the world as events unfolded. The authors' experiences in China, 11 days after the earthquake, recall TV stations that pre-empted regular programming for extended periods of time to share government press conferences and television reporters' human interest stories. Differences in Chinese civil society and the Chinese government in 2008 – compared to 32 years earlier and the news about the Tangshan quake – help explain the openness in how earthquake news and the government's response were communicated with a wider (and global) audience.

Rafia Zakaria, speaking at the 2011 ASIANetwork annual meeting, said, "Unless you understand how something affects individual lives, you don't understand the complexity of an issue." In the spirit of her statement, this paper examines a Sichuan area's situation and one woman's commitment to improving the livelihoods of village families devastated by the Great Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008.

Aba Qiang-Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture: Wenchuan County: Yingxiu Town

In parts of China where a sizeable population of an ethnic minority resides, the central government offers some self-governance ability to those regions. Such self-governing areas are called "autonomous regions" (*zizhiqu*) and are created by legislation of the Chinese central government. Primarily populated by ethnic Qiang and Tibetan (*Zang*) people, Aba is one such example of an autonomous area, in this case, a prefecture. Its land area of 84,000 km² [4] is roughly equivalent to the size of South Carolina.

Wenchuan County's 4,100 km² lies tucked within the Longmen mountain range. It sits 146 km (91 miles) northwest of Chengdu, Sichuan province's capital, and in 2007 was home to over 105,000 people [5].

Yingxiu town (population 6,900) [6] will be forever memorialized because it was the epicenter of the Great Wenchuan Earthquake of 2008. Resting at the confluence of the rushing Min and Yuzixi Rivers, and tucked in a valley of the steep Balang Mountains, Yingxiu was not much more than a rest stop for trucks traveling the difficult roads of Aba prefecture. Truck drivers would only pause in Yingxiu long enough to eat a home-cooked meal at a local restaurant or to spend the night at a small inn. Much of the population lived on the mountains surrounding the town center. They lived as subsistence farmers, or picked walnuts and mushrooms from the mountains to sell in town.

Who are the Qiang?

An ethnic group that is one of China's oldest, originating between 3,000 to 5,000 years ago, the Qiang live primarily in western China in what is today western Sichuan province. The Qiang population numbered just over 306,000 according to the 2000 census [7]. Experts analyzing the earthquake's impact on the Qiang ethnic group approximate eight to 10 percent of China's Qiang population perished [8].

Embroidery is as natural to Qiang women as are walking and talking. Nearly all Qiang women are taught to embroider at an early age, usually by their mothers or grandmothers. When a girl turned 10 years old, she would begin to make her wedding trousseau under the guidance of her mother. She would be married when she finished embroidering all of the items for her new home. On her wedding day her exquisite embroidery would win the praise of all the wedding guests. From then on, all of the headscarves, clothes, and shoes to be worn by her husband and children would be crafted from the woman's own hands. Sometimes she would send her handiwork to relatives and friends as gifts. This basic skill turned out to be a significant advantage for the creation of Master Yang's business structure, as will be described later.

Other ethnic groups emerged from the Qiang as a result of thousands of years of ethnic migration and development. Therefore, efforts to preserve and promote Qiang culture have great significance for the broader cultural diversity of China.

Who is Master Yang?

Yang Huazhen was born in Xiaojin county, Aba Qiang-Tibetan autonomous prefecture, Sichuan province, in 1957. It is a lush mountainous area, with wild rivers crossing the landscape. Xiaojin county sits at the foot of Siguniang Mountain, a scenic glacier tucked into the folds of the Qionglai mountains and near the source of the Xiaojinchuan River. Master Yang, an ethnic Tibetan, went to primary school and middle school in Xiaojin county. But her formal education abruptly stopped after the 8th grade when all schools were shut down during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). With her middle school closed, Yang Huazhen was forced to return home and help her family on their farm.

Yang Huazhen said she learned embroidery from her mother and grandmother. She was a life-long resident of Xiaojin county. As an adult, she worked as a photographer for the Aba prefecture newspaper. Master Yang traveled throughout the autonomous region taking photographs and knew it well.

On that fateful day in May 2008, Yang was working in Yingxiu township. She experienced the ferocity of the earthquake firsthand. The tremor killed many of her friends across Aba prefecture. Not unlike others who survive natural disasters, Yang Huazhen spent many weeks after the earthquake reflecting on why she didn't die. All the while, much-needed material and financial help was pouring into Sichuan province. Domestic and foreign aid groups offered food, shelter, clothing, medical assistance, and money to the survivors and local governments in the earthquake zone. Master Yang remembers thinking "the whole world wanted to come in and help".

But something about this help kept gnawing away at her heart. Yang Huazhen finally hit on the core source of her discomfort: this help was temporary. When the aid agencies and private donors and foreign governments were done with their humanitarian efforts they would depart Sichuan, leaving her people to pick up their lives. But there was nothing left for them to pick up. "This wasn't enough," says Master Yang. "People needed to be able to help themselves," she stresses. What they didn't have was the means to create small businesses and other sources for earning income.

Taking matters into her own hands, Yang Huazhen decided to make her way to Chengdu to see what she could do to help people in Yingxiu township and other places in hard-hit Wenchuan county. She and six friends walked from Yingxiu to Chengdu shortly after the earthquake. This arduous travel took three days. By the time they reached Dujiangyan, 27 km (16 miles) from Yingxiu, two members of the group were so badly hurt that they were left behind and the remaining five people continued to walk to Chengdu.

The Seeds of the Tibetan-Qiang Embroidery Center

The homes of many elderly women in her home village were destroyed. In a quest to do something meaningful for the women, Yang Huazhen was suddenly struck by an idea. Although Master Yang was an accomplished photographer, she acknowledged that "teaching old women photography was going to be difficult". Where would they get the camera equipment, and how would they send the photographs they took to the rest of the world? In addition, how could they earn income doing this?

You will recall that all of the elderly women knew how to embroider. Master Yang herself was highly skilled in both Tibetan and Qiang embroidery. Thus emerged the epiphany: she knew the old women could use their embroidery skills to earn income. She had an idea to "bring the women to Chengdu", where she would "set up a house for the women to live in and where they could do their embroidery". Her vision became a reality three months after the Great Wenchuan Earthquake, in August 2008.

Using 30,000 Chinese RMB (about \$4,500) of her own money, she found a small house to rent that could double as living quarters and a workshop. She and 12 elderly women from her village— six Qiang and six Tibetan — moved to Chengdu to start embroidering. Two months later, however, her money ran out. "How could I continue?", Master Yang questioned, "I am not a businesswoman. I just had an idea to help these women." Furthermore, some of the elderly village women could not become accustomed to living in a vast urban area.

Yang Huazhen was despondent and seriously considered ending her small enterprise. But one month later, in October 2008, the chief executive officer of Wenshufang, a traditional shopping and cultural neighborhood situated across the street from Wenshu Monastery, heard the story of Master Yang. He asked to meet with Yang, and after several conversations invited her to move her workshop to Wenshufang. He became a partial investor in the venture along with Yang Huazhen. The Tibetan-Qiang Embroidery Center (Zang QiangXiu Yuan) opened on May 12, 2009, one year to the day after the Great Wenchuan Earthquake.

From the beginning, Master Yang insisted she was not doing this as charity work. She refused to take donations. "Money is not enough," she explains. "I want to help the women help themselves. We have hands and we have skills. What we need is orders for products," Master Yang insists.

At its start, the Tibetan-Qiang Embroidery Center consisted of a workshop and retail store in Wenshufang, Chengdu. Master Yang wanted to identify some village women to relocate to Chengdu; there they would work and embroider items for sale in the store as well as continue to study with Master Yang to advance their embroidery techniques. The income earned would be sent back to their families in the villages. However, when she reflected on the experience from autumn of 2008, she recalled the women's homesickness and difficulty in adapting to life in Chengdu. Yang ended up abandoning the relocation plan. Instead, she developed a plan to bring the training to the women. With her then-apprentice, Ha Shiling, a native of Chengdu, they created training centers in a number of Wenchuan county villages. Using a "teach the teacher" approach, Master Yang and Ha could reach more women.

At first, Master Yang's emphasis was on "providing sources of income for older women, women who lost everything in the earthquake". Many of them were older than Yang, in their 60s and 70s. "The first question I had to consider was 'how to help the women survive right after the earthquake?'. Now, five years later, I am asking 'how do we keep this embroidery culture and tradition alive? How do I keep the culture going?'"

Those who will serve as village embroidery teachers are chosen by Master Yang. "The first time, I chose women I knew had high skill levels and talent. Many were friends, or daughters of friends. And the women had to be interested in this project," she emphasized. After starting this work in her home village, Yang and Ha expanded their activities to other counties in Aba prefecture: Xiaojin, Wenchuan, Jiuzhaigou, Hongyuan, Qingchuan, and Beichuan.

With a growing number of embroiderers providing her with handcrafts and the increased tourist traffic visiting Yingxiu town (because of its fame as the Wenchuan Earthquake's epicenter), Master Yang opened a retail store in Yingxiu in 2011. Its location in the center of town on a street filled with restaurants, bars, and other local handcraft shops is the ideal venue to promote her products and educate visitors about Qiang embroidery culture.

Additionally, in 2012, Master Yang moved the original store in Wenshufang to a larger space in Wenshufang and added a Tibetan-Qiang culture museum. She is in the process of cataloguing and displaying the many objects she's collected over the years, from textiles to household goods to firearms and weapons used by these ethnic peoples.

Government Recognition of Qiang Embroidery

China's track record of acknowledging, preserving, and nurturing its many ethnic peoples' traditions is mixed. But in the time since the Great Wenchuan Earthquake the central government has come to see the value in addressing cultural preservation. On June 14, 2008, Qiang embroidery was named as a national intangible cultural heritage by the central Chinese government.

Four-and-a-half years later, Yang Huazhen was identified as a representative of China's national intangible cultural heritage by the Chinese central government (December 20, 2012). Such recognition as a conservator of culture has put her, the women of Aba prefecture, and Qiang traditions in the national spotlight. Master Yang, however, maintains her dual focus and drive to bring income opportunities to the Qiang women and emphasize the critical task of preserving Qiang embroidery culture.

"First, minority people have no limits. There should not be any borders or ownership of Tibetan and Qiang culture. It belongs to all people and is not to be kept only by Tibetan and Qiang people. It should spread across the world. Second, Tibetan-Qiang embroidery culture should be adaptable and innovate so more people will become interested in it. It needs to be creative and look to the future. This way, we can design more products for the market.

Third, in the future I hope more women can make products at home in their villages and sell them in the city. No one goes to the villages to buy goods, but we can bring the products to places like Chengdu and Yingxiu for sale. And we can increase the women's incomes."

A Trip to Qiangfeng Village

Qiangfeng village is situated 37km (23 miles) from Yingxiu town. Before the earthquake, access to this hamlet was provided by a snake-like single-lane road hugging the mountainsides. It would take the better part of a day to drive its perilous route.

Life hasn't changed much over the last 100 years but for the fact that the village has running water and electricity. Like many people living in rural areas of China, the people survive as subsistence farmers and raise a few animals for their own use and for sale. Corn, peppers, and beans are their primary crops. Mushrooms and walnuts are harvested from the mountains nestled up against the village. Qiangfeng has only one school, a primary school. One newly built *diaolou* (a traditional Qiang watchtower) sits near the north side of the village. It replaces one destroyed in the earthquake. Because Qiangfeng is subject to frequent rockslides and mudslides, a concrete spillway was constructed in 2013 as a means of channeling these deadly flows away from homes. Nonetheless, any night when heavy rains are forecasted the government evacuates villagers to higher ground near the village.

Nearly every structure in Qiangfeng was destroyed in the earthquake. In the aftermath of the disaster, the Chinese central government assigned provincial governments to provide financial support for rebuilding village homes and other structures. Qiangfeng's benefactor was the government of Guangdong province, in China's southeast. Money from Guangdong helped resurrect homes and farms which otherwise would have been abandoned.

As villagers' homes and other buildings were being attended to, Master Yang concerned herself with finding ways for the village women to earn income. Between 2009 and 2012, she made the rounds of Qiang villages and set up teaching centers in many of them. In 2012, she chose to make Qiangfeng the base of her embroidery operation for three reasons. First, she knew of one woman, Wang Qingshu, who had outstanding natural talent for embroidery. Next, Qiangfeng village is famous for its Qiang embroidery. The final reason was more pragmatic: Qiangfeng, though remote, was nearer to Chengdu than many of the other Qiang villages. For Yang Huazhen's frequent trips between her retail stores in Chengdu and Yingxiu and the villages, the place that would become her operational base needed to be as close as possible to Chengdu and Yingxiu.

Inheritor of Qiang Embroidery Culture, Wang Qingshu

Teacher Wang – as she is called – is a retired primary school teacher. She was the sole teacher in the only school in Qiangfeng village, a primary school. Students learned Chinese, mathematics, music, science, painting, and political thought from her. Now 59 years old, Wang has a second career as an embroiderer and embroidery teacher to Qiangfeng village women. In 2012, Wang Qingshu was recognized by the Aba autonomous prefecture government as an inheritor of Qiang embroidery culture. Teacher Wang says she learned embroidery from her mother and other women in the village. Master Yang met Teacher Wang in 2012 when she came to Qiangfeng village to scout it out as her base of operations in Wenchuan county. She found Wang Qingshu to have tremendous talent, creativity, and a broad imagination for developing new designs. It was not a difficult decision to select Teacher Wang as the teacher for other Qiangfeng village women.

But it might not have turned out this way. At a very early age – she cannot remember exactly – Wang Qingshu was abandoned in Qiangfeng village. Brought up by a village family, and calling the woman who raised her "mother", Teacher Wang emerged into a very smart young girl with a special talent for singing. When she was in senior high school, a team of officials from Beijing was touring remote parts of Sichuan province looking for young people to recruit into government service for a "modern theatre" troupe – most likely to promote Communist propaganda through newly created plays and opera. However, Wang Qingshu had been promised by her family to a young man in an arranged marriage. She felt she had to honor that commitment. Wang Qingshu turned down the opportunity to be a professional singer and stayed in Qiangfeng to become a wife.

About her embroidery, Teacher Wang says she has no favorite patterns or colors for her work. "I do enjoy embroidering images of nature," she admits. When asked how she comes up with ideas for her free-form embroidery, Wang explains, "I sometimes innovate by drawing designs on paper and sometimes I just see the picture in my mind". She says that the traditional Qiang patterns are not written down anywhere and these are learned by copying them generation after generation.

Asked about her thoughts on being able to earn income from handwork that's considered a normal skill for Qiang women to possess, Teacher Wang replied, "I am very happy to share Qiang embroidery culture with others, and glad to have a chance to increase our family income." She says she cannot believe that handwork done by Qiang women for practical reasons – to brighten up their clothes and other daily use items – could actually be sold to people in the city. Teacher Wang thinks it's wonderful that what is considered ordinary and common by the villagers is of interest to others.

Zhou Pingkang, Teacher Wang's husband and also an ethnic Qiang, takes all of this attention in stride. Sitting on a stool at the edge of their living room, smoking a cigarette while a group of 10 university students from Tsinghua and Tongji universities interview Wang, Mr. Zhou admits he's very proud of his wife. "I am very supportive of her efforts to protect our several thousand year old Qiang culture. It makes our country proud, too."

Continuing the Tradition

It is not a bright future, however. Master Yang and Teacher Wang fear a loss of the tradition. "Younger people think there is little value in embroidering," say several of the university students present at the time of the authors' interview with Teacher Wang. Likewise, Wang Qingshu laments, "Young people cannot afford to sell their embroidery. There's not enough money in it to make a living. Instead, teens must go out to the county to find work that pays enough." As well, she believes young people genuinely aren't interested in preserving the embroidery culture. "And it's bad for the eyes," Teacher Wang adds.

Another problem is that consumers aren't always willing to pay top prices for traditional handwork. "If you figure the number of hours that an embroiderer puts into her work and price the piece accordingly, you have a potentially expensive product," notes Wang Qingshu. People believe that folk art, since it's not a sophisticated art form, should be affordable. Who's going to buy a US \$100 (600 RMB) handmade traditional embroidered tiger? Is the typical tourist walking through Yingxiutownship or Wenshufang in Chengdu going to hand over this kind of cash for a woolen stuffed animal?

Like the teahouse, which provides a micro-social space for Chinese men, the place where Chinese women gather to embroider is their micro-social space. This is especially true for women living in small towns and villages. While embroidering, women occupy a mostly private space to chat, learn, and share oral histories from the past. Does embroidering - and the physical place where it is done - create an appropriate space for women to conduct business and engage socially? In addition to embroidering's ability to help families add to their income, it has social and cultural value independent of any central government declaration of its worth.

But what is happening to the art of Qiang embroidery? Is the talent and interest among younger Qiang women fading and in need of protection? Yang and Wang believe so. How can these skills be preserved? Where does the responsibility to promote continuation of cultural traditions rest? Is it with individuals such as Yang and Wang? Or should provincial and central government bodies provide the means to protect it? Is designating a handcraft or naming someone a master craftswoman sufficient? Should teaching and passing down the traditions be in the hands of the private or public sphere? More questions than answers exist.

If we consider the words of Master Yang and truly believe that Tibetan and Qiang culture belongs to everyone, perhaps the threat of a loss of such shared values and traditions is the turning point for renewed support for Qiang embroidery. The Chinese government, entrepreneurs, scholars and students, tourists, citizens of China, and above all the Qiang people must decide for themselves whether the benefit of Qiang embroidery is worth the cost to protect and preserve its heritage.

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End Notes

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