

Innovative Practice of Shawl Design Integrating Tradition and Fashion: Comparison and Application of Ming and Qing Dynasty Cloud Shoulders and Naxi Seven-Star Shawls

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Abstract: This study investigates the integration of traditional Chinese shawls into modern fashion through a comparative analysis of the Ming-Qing Cloud Shoulder and the Naxi Seven-Star Sheepskin Shawl. By examining their design elements—shape, materials, patterns, and functions—the research identifies shared principles of symmetry, cultural symbolism, and adaptability while highlighting divergent aesthetics rooted in maximalist ornamentation (Cloud Shoulder) versus minimalist pragmatism (Naxi shawl). A survey of 16–24-year-old fashion-conscious women (76.2% in North America) reveals strong market potential for culturally infused designs, prioritizing creativity (75.36%), comfort (74.49%), and modern tailoring. Three design innovations—extraction, transformation, and inversion—reinterpret traditional motifs, such as auspicious butterflies and geometric stars, into contemporary gowns that blend silk, pearls, and sustainable materials. The findings demonstrate how cultural narratives, like the Naxi concept of “wearing the stars and moon” and the Cloud Shoulder’s celestial harmony, can empower modern wearers through symbolic protection and identity. This work bridges historical craftsmanship with global fashion trends, offering actionable strategies to enhance cultural relevance and commercial viability.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese shawls, cultural fusion, modern fashion design, symbolic empowerment, sustainable heritage innovation.

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and cultural homogenization, how to integrate traditional culture into modern fashion has become a focal point for both the academic and design communities [1], limitations persist in practice: (1) Design innovation often lacking in-depth cultural exploration; (2) Insufficient market and audience research, resulting in the untapped commercial potential of traditional cultural symbols; (3) Lack of interdisciplinary perspectives has prevented a deeper exploration of the cultural communication value of traditional attire in the modern context.

This study compares the Cloud Shoulder of the Ming and Qing dynasties with the Naxi Seven-Star Sheepskin Shawl in terms of shape, materials, patterns, and functions. The goal is to preserve the cultural essence while integrating traditional elements into modern fashion, promoting the dissemination and development of traditional attire on the international stage, and injecting diverse cultural inspiration into contemporary fashion.

2. Comparative study

Table 1: Design style comparison

Dimension	Similarities	Cloud Shoulder of the Ming and Qing Dynasties	Naxi “Seven-Star” Sheepskin Shawl
Shape	1. Symmetry and balance 2. Fits the human body shoulder curve with decoration	1. Various shapes, including circular, diamond, and layered structures 2. Decorative style leans towards maximalism, with exquisite embroidery	1. Uniform shapes, including trapezoidal or triangular, and neatly cut. 2. The design style tends to be minimalist, with smooth lines and rough craftsmanship [2].
Materials	1. Harmonious color combinations 2. Embroidery craftsmanship	1. Predominantly bright colors like red, yellow, and white 2. Mainly uses silk and brocade	1. Dominant colors like black, white, and blue 2. Primarily uses sheepskin and cotton fabric
Patterns	1. Use animals, plants and characters as the main pattern elements	1. Patterns are more figurative, faithfully representing real objects like butterflies and flowers	1. More abstract patterns, rich in imagination, emphasizing spiritual symbolism
Functions	1. Providing happiness and security for the wearer 2. Symbolizes female power	1. Cultural blessings and psychological hints conveyed through symmetrical patterns (implicit function) 2. Worn for formal occasions by nobles and scholars (explicit function)	1. Strengthening the wearer’s sense of belonging through patterns related to daily life (implicit function) 2. Primarily used for labor, warmth, and religious ceremonies (explicit function)

Shape Comparison: The “Cloud Shoulder” from the Ming and Qing dynasties, originating in the Sui Dynasty, became a symbol of traditional Chinese attire. Its design emphasizes symmetry and balance, reflecting the harmony between heaven and earth. Popular shapes include the “Four-Piece Ruyi,” “Willow Leaf,” “Round Flower,” and “Longevity Peach.” (Figure1) The cloud shoulder’s rich details, bold patterns, and layered textures define maximalism.



Figure 1: Four major types of Cloud Shoulder shapes. BIFT Museum. n.d. Four major types of Cloud Shoulder shapes. <http://www.biftmuseum.com/collection/list>



Figure 2: Naxi Seven-Star Shawls and clothing structure. Wikipedia contributors. n.d. Naxhi people. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakhi_people

In contrast, the Naxi Seven-Star Shawl features a minimalist design, traditionally crafted from black or white sheepskin in an inverted trapezoid or triangular shape. Its understated embellishments—seven small discs and thin cords—emphasize functionality, making it well-suited for labor and religious ceremonies [3]. Characterized by smooth lines, refined yet simple craftsmanship, and exceptional durability, the shawl reflects a balance of practicality and cultural significance.

Despite significant differences in shape, both the cloud shoulder and Naxi shawl follow the design principles of symmetry and balance, fitting the human body shoulder's curve to combine decoration and functionality. These shawls reflect ethnic characteristics and the influence of different social environments on aesthetics and function.

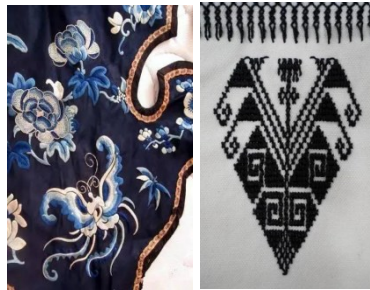


Figure 3: Lijiang culture and arts school. Lijiang culture and arts School. n.d. Naxi butterfly pattern. https://www.lywhxy.com/ysx/content/details3_94367.html. MSHJLB. n.d. Cloud Shoulder butterfly pattern. <http://www.mshjlb.com/portal.php?mod=view&aid=397>

Materials Comparison: The cloud shoulder and Naxi Seven-Star Shawl contrast in color and material. The cloud shoulder features reds, yellows, and whites, symbolizing energy and vitality, aligning with the Five Elements color theory in Chinese tradition. Made primarily of brocade, its rich hues enhance intricate embroidery. In contrast, the Seven-Star Shawl adopts black, white, and blue, influenced by Dongba beliefs, representing solemnity and purity [4]. Crafted from sheepskin, it undergoes complex processing for unique texture and durability. While the cloud shoulder emphasizes color layering and contrast, the Seven-Star Shawl embodies a simpler, more practical aesthetic. Both hold distinct cultural significance, reflecting different artistic expressions and traditions.

Patterns Comparison: Cloud shoulder patterns from the Ming and Qing dynasties are highly figurative, realistically depicting objects. The butterfly motif (left) features layered wings and fluid

lines, creating a lifelike, fluttering effect. Embroidery enhances its vitality, symbolizing nature's continuity.

In contrast, Naxi shawls use a geometric butterfly motif (right), often in inverted triangles [5]. Simplified into clean lines, it exudes abstraction. Despite stylistic differences, both incorporate animals, plants, and human figures with auspicious meanings, reflecting nature's harmony. Whether figurative or abstract, both designs serve decorative and cultural functions, embodying deep traditions.

Functions Comparison: The cloud shoulder structured symmetry “ruyi cloud” patterns and auspicious colors to offer cultural blessings and psychological comfort. Symmetrical patterns convey stability, promoting emotional ease and pleasure [6]. Symbolic patterns such as auspicious clouds can enhance mood and happiness, and cloud shoulders are usually worn by nobles and scholars on formal occasions, symbolizing status and cultural identity [7].

In contrast, the Naxi shawl, though symbolic, is tied to daily life. Patterns like “Seven Stars” and “Sun and Moon” represent cultural strength, fostering belonging and security [8]. Tangible symbols can provide emotional comfort and strengthen women's cultural connections [9]. Shawls play a practical role in labor, warmth and ceremony, while their patterns provide spiritual support and cultural heritage.

3. Design innovation

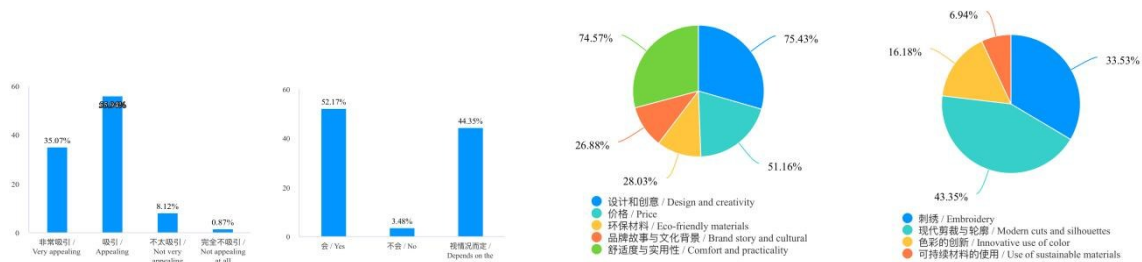


Figure 4: Questionnaire results. Survey results from 1347 participants in China and North America regarding cultural preferences in fashion. Data collected and chart created by author, 2025

Design Goals: This collection fuses Ming-Qing cloud shoulders, Naxi shawls, and modern fashion to showcase cultural evolution. Inspired by “carrying the stars and moon” and “harmony between heaven and humanity,” the Naxi “Seven-Star” shawl symbolizes resilience, while the cloud shoulder reflects status and aspirations. Beyond elegance, these shawls now embody strength. Modern women should see them as symbols of power and protection—embracing love and confidence. This collection reinterprets celestial and cloud motifs as enduring emblems of feminine strength. To ensure alignment with public aesthetics, a survey analyzed the fusion of traditional Chinese attire with modern fashion. Results show 91.01% support this blend, highlighting market potential, while 52.17% are willing to wear Chinese style dress to events, highlighting the huge potential for making cultural dress brands in North America.

In fashion consumption, key factors are design creativity (75.43%), comfort (74.57%), and modern tailoring (43.35%), while eco-friendly materials (28.03%) attract less attention. For Chinese-style gowns, 52.17% would wear them for formal events. This suggests that cultural events, innovative design, and social promotion can enhance awareness while blending modern cuts and embroidery to meet aesthetic and functional needs.

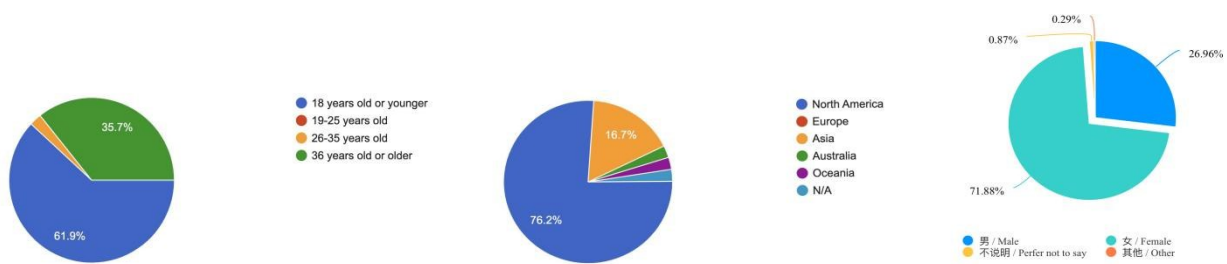


Figure 5: Demographic factors of survey participants. Demographic breakdown of 1347 survey participants, including age distribution, gender identity, and regional representation (China and North America). Data collected and chart created by author, 2025

The target audience is fashion-conscious women aged 16-24, especially those in North America (76.2%) and Asia (16.7%) with a strong interest in Chinese culture. They value individuality and cultural identity, using fashion to express themselves [10], particularly at formal events like banquets and proms. Most are students or aspiring fashion professionals, such as designers and bloggers. The design style focuses on commercial gowns, blending Naxi traditional elements with modern fashion for both aesthetics and practicality.

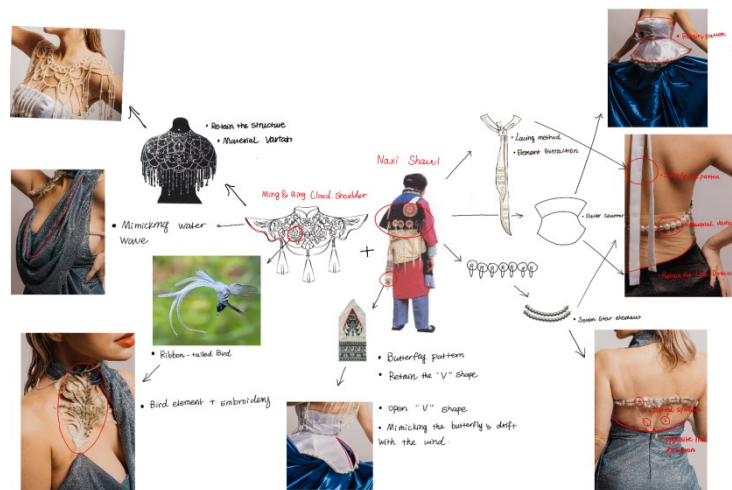


Figure 6: Design principles diagram. Mind map illustrating the inspiration sources and design methodology. Created by author, 2025

Design Principles: The design principles explore the similarities and differences between the Naxi shawl and the cloud shoulder, analyzing their aesthetic features to integrate traditional elements into modern fashion. Inspired by the symbolism of “wearing the stars and moon” and “harmony between nature and humanity,” the collection conveys nature’s protective power for women, encouraging fearless love and self-expression. Sustainable materials are used throughout, reinforcing the harmony between tradition and modernity.

Design Methods: This design is centered around cloud shoulders and Naxi shawls, incorporating three innovative techniques: extraction, transformation, and inversion, as illustrated in the mind map.

- **Extraction:** Selecting the auspicious ribbon bird motif from traditional cloud shoulders while preserving its original structure, then modifying its colors to add a contemporary touch (see the lower left).

- Transformation: Integrating the butterfly motif common to both Naxi and Ming-Qing shawls, simplifying intricate traditional patterns into a refined, modern aesthetic. For example, a V-shaped cutout mimics butterfly wings, symbolizing longevity and vitality (see the center bottom).
- Inversion: Reconstructing the fundamental shapes of Naxi shawls and cloud shoulders by inverting their traditional structures, adapting them into contemporary garment designs that blend heritage with modernity.
- This innovative approach illustrates the evolution of fashion—from the raw and natural aesthetics of early times, through the intricate refinement of the agrarian era, to the seamless fusion of tradition and modernity today. The color palette reflects this progression: transitioning from the earthy black-and-white tones of the past, to the bright blue-and-white hues of the agricultural period, and finally to the contemporary interplay of blue, red, and gold, symbolizing the harmonious integration of cultural heritage and modern fashion.

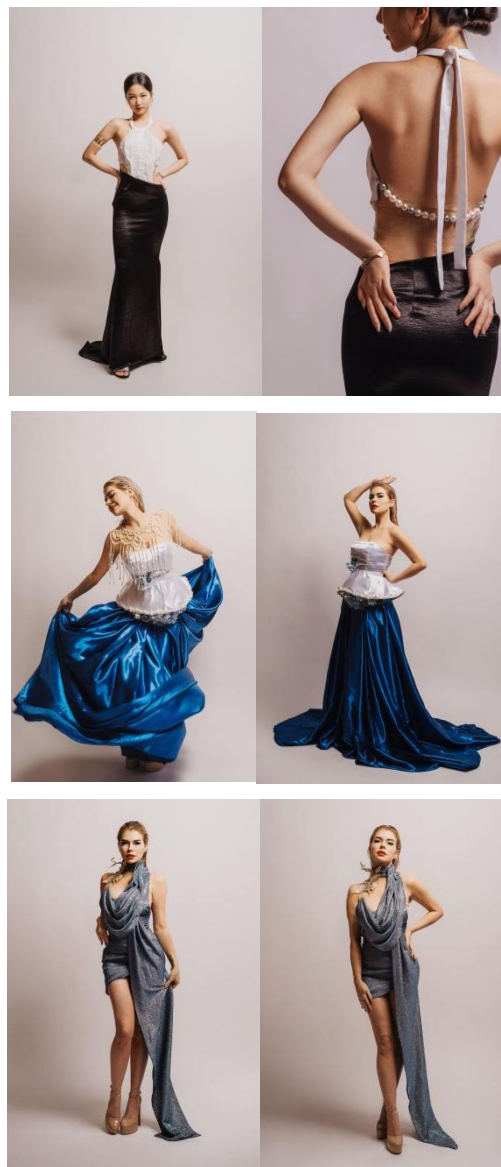


Figure 7: Design results. Fusion fashion piece integrating traditional Naxi seven-stars shawl and Ming Qing dynasty cloud shoulder. Designed and photographed by author, 2025

Design Outcomes: Design that represents the early period uses faux leather silk to create a rugged yet natural texture, preserving the raw essence of traditional craftsmanship. A black-and-white palette highlights the shawl's pure, original essence, symbolizing depth and harmony. This minimalist contrast bridges tradition and modernity. Inspired by the cloud shoulder's curved, layered form and the Naxi "Seven Stars on the Back" concept, the design reflects cultural heritage and spiritual guidance. By merging material, color, and form, it honors history while embracing contemporary aesthetics, making tradition relevant in modern fashion.

Mid-period design, particularly in the Ming and Qing dynasties, emphasized luxury and aristocratic elegance. This piece incorporates the cloud shoulder, crafted entirely from pearls, symbolizing status and refinement. A long silk gown complements the design, reflecting the opulence of noble attire during this era. The design also integrates floral motifs from Yunnan shawl patterns, specifically the lomatogonium, blending regional cultural symbolism with imperial fashion. This fusion of cloud shoulder aesthetics, silk fabric, and intricate ornamentation showcases the grandeur and craftsmanship of Ming and Qing aristocratic dress while reinterpreting it for contemporary expression.

Modern design embraces fluidity and elegance, using ball gown fabrics. This piece fuses Naxi shawl and cloud shoulder with 3D flying birds, symbolizing freedom and modernity. Inspired by the Naxi "Seven Stars on the Back", it blends cultural depth with individuality. By merging tradition and innovation, it redefines heritage in contemporary fashion.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study integrates traditional Chinese shawl designs into modern fashion, focusing on the Ming-Qing cloud shoulder and Naxi Seven-Star sheepskin shawl. It emphasizes their cultural significance and shared design principles, showcasing their potential for contemporary fashion. The value lies in connecting tradition with modernity, making cultural heritage accessible to global audiences. Future improvements could expand the use of traditional elements and refine marketing strategies to enhance cultural relevance in modern design.



Figure 8: Photograph of fieldwork with indigenous people in Yunnan (the author is the first person from right to left). Field research photo with Yunnan ethnic minority community, showing cultural context of garment inspiration. The author appears first from right to left. Original photograph by author, 2025



Figure 9: Fashion design process. Visual representation of the design process for integrating Naxi cultural elements into modern fashion. Diagram created by author, 2025

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