PAST FORVARD.

Reviving Miao embroidery

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Photo by Miao's Tales Costume Museum

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Foreword

Hello, we are Nancy and Daphne, born and raised in the culturally diverse nation of China, which is home to 56 unique ethnic groups. Our backgrounds are vastly different; Nancy comes from the Han ethnic group, which makes up 91% of the population, while Daphne is from the Tujia ethnic group, accounting for a mere 0.6%. Despite growing up in the mainstream and minority ethnic groups of China, our mission is the same: to promote the adaptation and development of traditional cultures in our rapidly changing world.

From a young age, we have both been deeply passionate about the local culture, crafts, and history we encountered. Upon studying abroad, we were exposed to a kaleidoscope of cultures from around the globe, which made us realize the importance of our cultural identity and heritage, and the need to take pride in our own culture. However, in China, fewer and fewer young people are engaged in the preservation and practice of traditional culture. It was during this time that we discovered the art of Miao embroidery, captivated by its cultural significance and mystique. We witnessed the tireless efforts of the older generation to keep this craft alive, but also saw their sense of helplessness as their struggled to endure. Miao embroidery motifs, handed down through generations, are now at risk of being lost, as young Miao individuals are increasingly influenced by modern art and aesthetics, leading them to question the relevance of this age-old tradition.

We recognized that Miao embroidery was in dire need of innovation and revitalization to bridge the gap between the traditional and the modern. This realization inspired our project, which seeks to develop new ways to integrate Miao embroidery with contemporary culture, making it more accessible and appealing to a broader audience. By doing so, we hope to preserve not only the intricate techniques of Miao embroidery but also the stories and spirit behind this cultural treasure.

Join us on this journey as we explore the world of Miao embroidery, striving to create a fusion of the traditional and the contemporary. Together, let us celebrate the beauty of cultural diversity and work to ensure that these precious art forms continue to flourish for generations to come.

With heartfelt passion, Nancy and Daphne



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Understanding Miao Embroidery

About Miao Minority

- Introduction: The Miao Minority

The Miao ethnic minority is a vibrant and culturally significant group that predominantly resides in southern China, Laos, Myanmar, northern Vietnam, and Thailand. Originally from China, the Miao are known for their animist beliefs and ancestor worship, and traditionally lived in villages situated at elevations ranging from 3,000 to 6,000 feet[1].

- Population and Demographics

In terms of population, the Miao are the fifth largest ethnic group and the fourth largest minority in China, with 11,067,929 individuals accounting for 0.79 percent of the country's total population as per the 2020 Chinese census[2].

- History and Migration

With a rich history, the Miao are mentioned in ancient Chinese texts dating back to the 12th century BC, and according to legend, they have inhabited the Yellow River and Yangzi River Valleys for over 5,000 years[3]. Despite being defeated in battle by the legendary Yellow Emperor, the Miao continued to resist rulers and eventually migrated to the forests and mountains of southwest China, particularly Guizhou Province. Our thesis specifically focuses on this region, where the Miao population accounts for more than a quarter of the entire Miao population in China.





What is **Miao Embroidery?**

The Miao people are an ethnic group that does not have a written language. As a result, their primary means of preserving and passing down their cultural heritage is through the embroidered patterns and images found on their clothing, known as Miao embroidery. This art form captures the essence of the Miao people's thousands of years of collective memory, culture, and heritage, telling the stories of their religion, history, and social changes throughout the centuries[4].

Clothing serves as a vehicle for Miao culture, with Miao embroidery playing a crucial role. The creation and wearing of Miao garments are also intertwined with religious activities, providing spiritual support that has led the Miao people to devote 4-5 years to making a single piece of clothing[5]. This dedication stems from a deep reverence for their craft, resulting in the ultimate pursuit of embroidery technique by the Miao people. Miao embroidery stands apart from that of other ethnic groups in terms of craftsmanship, content, and connotation, giving these ancient garments irreplaceable characteristics.

Miao girls begin learning embroidery and needlework as young as seven or eight years old. The skills are generally passed down from mother to daughter, sister to sister, through a natural process of inheritance and learning, rather than through formal apprenticeships. By the age of 14 or 15, a Miao girl has typically mastered considerable skills, continuing her craft throughout her life until her hands can no longer hold the needle and thread, and her eyes can no longer discern the stitches clearly[6].

Miao embroidery is a true reflection of the spiritual consciousness of the Miao people and represents the nation's survival worldview. It captures their understanding of the cosmos, life, nature, ancestors, and the relationships between all living things[4]. Miao embroiderers embellish their garments with mythical creatures, insects, fish, and flowers, creating intricate designs that showcase their rich cultural heritage.

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"The embroidered patterns are about the story of the ancestor of mankind. By embroidering their story on clothes and the cloth with which we carry our babies and singing songs about his story, we believe that he will protect us and our children."

—Pan Yuzhen, Miao embroiderer



Photo by Miao's Tales Costume Museum

Photo by Miao's Tales Costume Museum

Talk about the Social Issue

The problem is that fewer and fewer young people are engaged in Miao embroidery-related fields. According to a 2019 survey, 39% of craftswomen are over 55 years old, and the average age is over 50 years old[7]. The entire Miao embroidery ecosystem has reached an aging trend and is facing an inheritance crisis. If fewer young people engage in Miao embroidery work, the longstanding Miao culture will eventually disappear.

We often hear the following statements:

Miao elders in their fifties and sixties say, "We are no longer skilled. We need the elderly to be good at it. I can't even see with my eyes, and my hands are shaking so much. There's nothing I can do." A young Miao girl in her twenties says, "We don't know how to do it anymore. We need the book and we also need to work. Only my mother can do it." Teenage Miao children who spend their days reading books at school and their nights doing homework and watching TV[4].

The mountains of Huajing, Guizhou, cannot withstand the arrival of the internet era. Global economic integration has pushed many ethnic and folk cultural heritages of humanity to the brink of extinction[7].

For thousands of years, countless people have been inheriting and guarding the treasures of the Chinese nation's tradition and culture. It is precisely through their hearts, passed down from generation to generation, that we, living in modern times, can witness the rich and colorful traditions and culture of our ancestors. This kind of heritage needs to be inherited, nurtured, and understood with heartfelt appreciation.



"That's because the creators of these cultures themselves are not aware of the value they create. As those who aspire to this value, we have an obligation and responsibility to protect and inherit these cultural heritage."

—Jicai Feng

Why Should We Care About?

- Fostering culture diversity

Cultural diversity refers to the existence of different cultural traditions and values within different societies or parts of a society.

Miao embroidery is not only a unique art form, but it also carries a rich cultural heritage that has been passed down through generations. Through the preservation and promotion of Miao embroidery, people can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Miao culture and their way of life.

When people appreciate Miao embroidery, they also come to understand and respect the values and traditions of Miao culture. Miao embroidery is a cultural heritage and symbol of the Miao people, reflecting their beliefs, values, and way of life.

By learning Miao embroidery, they can gain a better understanding of Miao history and culture, while maintaining respect and appreciation for their traditional way of life and values.

- The importance of culture diversity

Our actions and approach to safeguarding Miao embroidery contribute to the revival of diverse cultures. With over 2,000 ethnic minorities worldwide, preserving and transmitting their cultural heritage is essential for maintaining global cultural diversity[8].

Each region boasts unique cultural traditions and values, all deserving of respect and preservation. By focusing on the inheritance and protection of Miao embroidery, we foster a deeper understanding of the value of cultural diversity. This, in turn, promotes mutual understanding and respect among different communities.

Protecting cultural identity

the preservation of Miao embroidery and the Miao culture can help The Miao people protect their cultural identity and ensure that their unique traditions and values are not lost. Through the transmission of Miao embroidery skills and the support of Miao women's economic opportunities, the Miao community can continue to thrive and develop while preserving their cultural heritage.



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"We must make room for diversity by protecting the rights of minorities, pluralistic, multiple, and multi-layered identities contribute to a more colorful societal tapestry. The variety of threads that are woven together strengthens our social fabric."

-Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner







Identifying the Problem



Before embarking on preliminary research and engaging in participatory research with our community, we first traveled to Guizhou to conduct field investigations. We interviewed 20 elderly and young people in the community to gain a better understanding of the spatial and contextual aspects of the project.

At this stage, we reviewed academic literature on cultural inheritance, Miao embroidery history, as well as the impact of modern art and technological advancements on the industry. We also examined various media articles, social media sources, and had conversations with industry experts. Lastly, we read books that provided insights, historical context, and background, including those related to the environmental aspects of the project.

In this section, you will discover our most important findings.

Systemic Issues in the

Miao Embroidery Inheritance

Transformation of lifestyle and language barrier

Over the past thousands of years, the Miao people have lived in deep mountains, using embroidery as a part of their daily practice. However, in the past 50 years, more Miao people have migrated from the mountains to big cities to study and work. The Miao people do not have a written language, and the older generation teaches Miao embroidery through hands-on instruction[9]. As a result, young people who move to the city lack the opportunities and means to learn embroidery. This challenge is further exacerbated by the language shift, a sociological phenomenon that occurs when a community adopts a new language, often at the expense of their original one[7].

Globalization, cultural homogenization, and changing aesthetics

Young people in big cities are exposed to modern and mass education, art, entertainment, and information. Consequently, their thoughts, ideas, and aesthetics are changing dramatically. As traditional embroidery methods become detached from modern life, young people's sense of identification with their traditional culture becomes increasingly indifferent[7]. The impact of globalization and cultural homogenization contributes to this detachment, as diverse and unique cultural elements are gradually replaced by a single, dominant culture.

Social mobility, value systems, and economic incentives

In addition to cultural factors, economic considerations play a significant role in young people's disinterest in Miao embroidery. An elderly craftsman told us that it takes 427 days to make a high-quality Miao embroidery garment[10], but according to 2020 data, the average salary of Miao craftswomen is only 500 USD per month, which is only half of the average salary in that province[11]. The desire for social mobility and better economic opportunities leads many Miao youth to prioritize education, career advancement, and higher incomes over preserving their traditional crafts.



How might we encourage young Miao inheritors to actively engage with Miao embroidery and utilize innovative means to maintain the place of traditional practices in modern culture?

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Conceptualization

Partnership

Miao's Tales Costume Museum

Miao's Tales Costume Museum, the first museum in China to focus on Miao embroidery, has an extensive collection of Miao embroidery masterpieces and not such[13]. The museum's permanent exhibition, "The Wordless Manuscript from Heaven," is a pioneering and influential exhibition that systematically displays and interprets the core value of Miao embroidery.

Curator of Miao's Tales Costume Museum

Zeng Li, Founder of the brand "Miao's Tale," ambassador of Chinese non-heritage Miao embroidery promotion, Miao embroidery collector, and independent researcher[14]. Also, the founder and curator of the first Miao embroidery museum worldwide—— Miao's Tales Costume Museum. Furthermore, the author of "Miao Embroidery," "The Secret Language of Miao Embroidery," and "Miao Costume".

At a young age, Zeng Li studied Miao embroidery culture under her father Zeng Xianyang (the first collector of Miao costumes in China), and has traveled all over the Miao mountains for more than 40 years[14]. Zeng Li is committed to inheriting the traditional culture of Miao embroidery and advocating the integration of non-heritage and modern life. PASTFORWARD



How to work with them

Providing cultural background and historical knowledge

Miao's Tales Costume Museum is dedicated to displaying and preserving the traditional culture of the Miao minority, including their history, traditional costumes, and way of life. The museum as well as founder Zeng Li provide relevant cultural background and historical knowledge to help us better understand and express the connotations and characteristics of Miao culture.

Helping build connection with Miao minority

The Miao's Tales Costume Museum can play a key role in connecting with the Miao people and helping to revive the Miao embroidery. Through our thesis partner, we can reach out to Miao young inheritors online and hear their feedback, voices and ideas.

Providing resource support

The Miao's Tales Costume Museum can provide us with valuable resources such as embroidery patches, tools, and image materials, which can support the Miao embroidery NFT (Non-Fungible-Tokens) project by providing high-quality image assets. The museum's collection of embroidery patches can be used as a reference for creating new designs, while their tools can be used for embroidery workshops and other related events. Additionally, their image materials can help to promote the beauty and cultural significance of Miao embroidery to a wider audience.



Measurement & Evaluation

Narrative

Goal

Our goal is to enhance the sustainability of Miao minority cultural heritage by increasing the popularity of Miao embroidery, young people's interest in Miao embroidery, and improving the quality of life for craftswomen. Specifically, we aim to increase the demand for and sales of Miao embroidery, as well as the viability of the Miao embroidery industry.

Outcome

To achieve this goal, we have identified three preconditions or pathways for change. These include increasing young people's motivation and knowledge to engage in protecting their culture, raising awareness of Miao embroidery and culture, and improving the income and connections of craftswomen.

Through our interventions, we aim to achieve several outcomes, including:

- Increased awareness of Miao embroidery and culture among the general public
- Increased motivation among young people to engage in protecting their culture
- Increased income for craftswomen through the sale of their needlework and aesthetic creations
- Increased connections between craftswomen and the outside world

To measure the success of our interventions, we aim to reach specific targets, including:

- Increased outreach to more than 1000 people through communication events focusing on Miao women and culture
- More than 300 people learning about the Miao embroidery program
- Increased 20% income for craftswomen through the sale of their needlework and aesthetic creations

Interventions

Our specific interventions include systematic displays of Miao embroidery patterns and stories, establishing connections between young people and Miao embroidery, and helping craftswomen make sustainable connections with the outside world. We will also publish Miao embroidery NFTs to increase the popularity of Miao embroidery and provide a platform for craftswomen to showcase their work.

Key Monitoring Questions

- To what extent did the systematic displays of Miao embroidery patterns and stories increase awareness of Miao embroidery and culture among the general public?
- How effective were the interventions in increasing motivation among young people to engage in protecting their culture, specifically in regards to Miao embroidery?
- To what extent did the interventions contribute to an increase in income for craftswomen through the sale of their needlework and aesthetic creations?
- How successful were the efforts to establish sustainable connections between craftswomen and the outside world?
- What was the impact of publishing Miao embroidery NFTs on the popularity of Miao embroidery and the showcasing of craftswomen's work?
- What were the unintended consequences of the interventions, if any?
- What were the most successful and least successful aspects of the interventions, and what improvements could be made for future implementation?
- What lessons can be learned from this project that can inform future efforts to enhance the sustainability of Miao minority cultural heritage or other similar initiatives?
- What recommendations can be made for the scaling-up or replication of this project in other contexts?

Key Evaluation Questions

• To what extent did the systematic displays of Miao embroidery patterns and stories increase awareness of Miao embroidery and culture among the general public?

- To what extent did the interventions contribute to an increase in income for craftswomen through the sale of their needlework and aesthetic creations?
- What were the unintended consequences of the interventions, if any?
- What were the most successful and least successful aspects of the interventions, and what improvements could be made for future implementation?
- What recommendations can be made for the scaling-up or replication of this project in other contexts?

Goal: Enhanced the sustainability of Miao minority cultural heritage



Interventions

Miao embroidery sustainability promoted via NFTs & cultural awareness.

Non-Fungible Tokens

Non-Fungible Token, is a type of cryptographic token on a blockchain that represents a unique item or piece of content. Unlike cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin or Ethereum, which are fungible and can be exchanged on a like-for-like basis, NFTs are unique - each one has a digital signature that distinguishes it from other tokens.

NFTs can represent digital files, such as art, music, games, and other forms of creative work. When you buy an NFT, you gain the ownership rights to a unique piece of data on the blockchain. While anyone can view or download the digital item, only the owner of the NFT has the 'official' version. NFTs integrate traditional and modern approaches, forming a complete cultural inheritance ecosystem for Miao embroidery

Environment Impact Assessment

Location Environmental Priorities:

The proposed activity of improving the motivation of young inheritors to pass on Miao embroidery is set in the context of the impact of modern civilization on traditional cultural practices. In the Miao Minority, young people are being influenced by modern thinking and technology, which has led to a lack of motivation to preserve their cultural identity. This cultural erosion is a significant concern politically and socially, as it threatens the cultural diversity and pluralism of society.

The location where the Miao Minority is situated is characterized by mountainous terrain and a unique cultural heritage. However, there are also environmental and climate issues that are being discussed politically and socially in this area. These issues include deforestation, soil erosion, and water pollution, which have resulted from unsustainable agricultural practices and industrialization. The government and local communities are actively working towards addressing these issues through conservation efforts and sustainable development initiatives.

Preserving cultural practices such as Miao embroidery can also contribute to environmental sustainability by promoting traditional knowledge and practices that are more in harmony with nature. The proposed activity of promoting the motivation of young inheritors to pass on Miao embroidery can, therefore, contribute to both cultural and environmental sustainability in the Miao Minority. About NFTs environment impact: In fact NFT needs a little energy. The following is how to achieve it: The energy costs required for blockchain processing (Trading, NFT, Applicationsetc) were once a problem. More than 90% of NFT transactions are conducted on the Ethereum blockchain. Before October last year[12], the Ethereum network used a structure called proof of work to process all transactions. However, after October last year, Ethereum updated its processing structure to prove its rights and interests. Compared with the previous processing structure, the energy cost decreased by 99.95%[12].

Decreased the energy cost by

99.95%

in POS (Proof Of Stake)

Co-Create Workshop

In order to determine the direction of our design, we collaborated with our thesis partner and young Miao people through a co-design workshop to talk about what is the most valuable part of Miao embroidey, and and what is important to achieve our goal, and we define 6 value for our project, which is story, pattern, art aesthetics, new technology, high public exposure, and economic value

- Story: It aims to preserve and share the unique stories embedded in Miao embroidery, enhancing the emotional connection with audiences.
- Pattern: We will maintain and respectfully evolve the intricate, symbolic patterns of Miao embroidery, preserving this unique visual language.
- Art Aesthetics: Our aim is to respect and enhance the artistic beauty of Miao embroidery, possibly through innovative methods.
- New Technology: We plan to use Web3 technologies to modernize and broaden the reach of Miao embroidery.
- High Public Exposure: Through social media, exhibitions, collaborations, and educational programs, we aim to increase global awareness and appreciation of Miao embroidery.
- Economic Value: By enhancing the economic value of Miao embroidery, we hope to provide sustainable support for the Miao community, inspire younger generations to close with the craft, and boost local economies.





Prototype

Generative Arts Experienment

In the process of developing our Miao NFTs, we conducted a visual identity workshop and three rounds of prototype iteration. The workshop allowed us to define an artistic direction that encapsulates the essence of Miao embroidery. This was followed by three rounds of prototyping, during which we created, refined, and polished our digital designs. By rigorously iterating, we ensured the final NFTs were not just visually appealing, but also accurate and respectful representations of the history and culture of Miao embroidery.





Prototype-Round 2



Prototype Round 3



Prototype Feedback

Inspired and excited about cultural relevance

The Miao young inheritor we talked with feels excited about using NFTs to reinterpret traditional Miao patterns for a wider audience, viewing it as an innovative approach to preserve and promote cultural heritage.

Disconnected due to abstract nature

The feedback we heard from non-Miao young people it hard to connect with the Miao culture through abstract generative art. They suggest providing more context about traditional techniques and patterns to help viewers appreciate the connection between the art and Miao culture.

Requires more time to create satisfactory

generative arts

Our team member recognizes that creating quality NFTs is a timeconsuming process. They suggest potentially delaying the release to ensure the NFTs authentically represent the complexity and beauty of Miao embroidery.



"I'm thrilled to see our traditional patterns reinterpreted in a new and innovative way through NFTs. It's a great opportunity to introduce our cultural heritage to a wider audience and preserve it for future generations."

-Miao young Inheritors

"I find it difficult to feel a connection to Miao embroidery through generative art, as it can be too abstract. Perhaps providing more context and background information on the traditional techniques and patterns would help me better appreciate the art and its connection to Miao culture."

-Non-Miao young people

"Creating NFTs that meet our standards takes time, and we may need to push back the release date for the generative art NFTs to ensure their quality."

-Team Member

Ecosystem Map

Keep Miao people in the circle

As social designers, we aim to bridge the gap between traditional Miao embroidery and modern life, viewing this intersection as an opportunity for sustainable preservation of this cultural art form. We plan to use modern technology for wider dissemination, promote community participation, and help the younger Miao generation reconnect with their cultural heritage. Our primary objective is to empower the Miao community, ensuring they remain at the heart of our initiatives.





Minority Cultural Tradition

Modern Life







Intervention Strategies

Morden Technology Support

Our primary intervention is the creation and upload of 100 Miao embroidery photo NFTs on OpenSea, a popular digital marketplace. By converting these intricate artworks into NFTs, we aim to modernize this traditional art form and make it accessible to a global, digitally-inclined audience. The goal is to attract more people to Miao embroidery, fostering greater appreciation for this unique art form. Additionally, the potential increase in value of these NFTs could drive interest in both the digital and physical embodiments of Miao embroidery, thereby supporting the economic sustainability of Miao craftwomen.

Miao Embroidery photo NFT

Finally, we upload 100 Miao embroidery photo nft as our first step, because we think this is a better way for our audience to get access to Miao's aesthetic, story, technique about the Miao embroidery, We choose one typical pattern, called "cross stitch". We have now published 100 pictures on the nft trading platform Opensea.



WHAT DEPARTMENT

Gross Stitch

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Photo by Miao's Tales Costume Museum

Miao embroidery is a diverse art form, reflecting the distinct identities of over 100 different Miao tribes through its varied patterns. These patterns are filled with symbolic meanings, narrating the history, beliefs, and customs of the Miao people. For our initial project, we have chosen to focus on the "cross stitch" pattern, a classic technique that carries unique cultural significance in the context of Miao embroidery.

The "cross stitch" pattern in Miao culture represents unity, harmony, and the connection between humans and nature. This pattern, composed of intricate geometric designs, mirrors the close-knit nature of Miao communities and their respectful coexistence with the natural world.









Opensea website link: <u>https://opensea.io/collection/miaoembroidery-collection</u>

Community Engagement

To deeply comprehend the Miao culture and the art of Miao embroidery, we plan to produce an insightful documentary that explores their traditions, craftsmanship, and personal narratives. Simultaneously, we aim to foster a robust collaboration with the Miao community, involving them in the design process to ensure authenticity and respect for their heritage.

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The documentary screenshot









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Documentary clip link

Video resourse by Guizhou Radio TV Station

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Share Miao Embroidery in Public

Moving forward, our primary goal is to establish a robust connection between Miao embroidery and the broader public. To achieve this, we have chosen to participate in an art fair organized by Mouhui Sun and Effy Tan from DSI. Our aim is to use this platform as a gateway for people to learn about, engage with, and appreciate Miao embroidery, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and celebration of this intricate and beautiful art form.

Ρ

AAAH! X PASTFORWARD.

oy Mouhui Sun

Our participation in the art fair has been rewarding, as we've connected with numerous individuals interested in Miao embroidery, and secured seven potential future collaborations. Moreover, the event generated over \$2000 in revenue in just two days, which we plan to reinvest into the community. We envision ourselves as a bridge, linking the rich cultural heritage of the Miao people from the mountains to modern markets. In essence, our presence is not just about us; it's about fostering a dialogue between the Miao culture and the youth in New York City.



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Conclusion and Final Remarks

Weaving Threads Forward

Establishment

We are pleased to announce that our thesis partner has successfully registered a company in New York. As co-founders, we remain dedicated to continuing the legacy of PastForward, focusing on the fusion of tradition and innovation to bring the art of Miao embroidery to a wider audience.

Ongoing Exploration and Inclusivity

Our journey extends beyond the establishment of the company, as it involves continuous exploration and growth. We are committed to maintaining the Miao people at the center of our initiatives, valuing their insights, skills, and cultural heritage. Our ongoing exploration will enable us to better understand the needs of the Miao community and develop innovative strategies for preserving and promoting their traditional art form.

Fostering Collaboration

We recognize that a single thread, albeit strong, cannot create an intricate pattern in isolation. It requires the interweaving of multiple threads, each possessing unique qualities, to produce a vibrant and elaborate design. In this vein, we seek to collaborate with a diverse range of individuals and groups who share our passion for cultural preservation. We cordially invite you to engage with us on Instagram at past forward. culture, and contribute to weaving a rich tapestry of shared heritage and mutual respect. PASTFORWARD

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Additional Support



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PAST FORWARD

Reviving Miao embroidery