

# PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES OF TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFTS OF SANJIANG DONG ETHNIC GROUP: A STUDY BASED ON CONSUMER PREFERENCES

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine consumer preferences for the traditional handicrafts of the Dong ethnic group in Sanjiang and to provide a theoretical basis for future product development. The research provides an extensive analysis of customer demographics, market demand, and suggestions for improving existing items, derived from interviews and thematic analyses of 40 consumers. The results demonstrate that clients value the cultural significance and traditional craftsmanship of Dong handicrafts, while simultaneously seeking the incorporation of modern design elements to meet individual preferences. This paper asserts that the cultural heritage of Dong handicrafts can be integrated with economic benefits through product diversification, craftsmanship enhancement, branding optimization, and the creation of portable products to meet consumer demands and strengthen market competitiveness.

**Keywords:** preferences, handicrafts, product design, thematic analysis, craft market

## INTRODUCTION

Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County is located in the northern part of China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and is an important cultural gathering place in China's ethnic minority regions. As the main ethnic group in the region, Dong accounts for 58% of the total population (Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County People's Government, 2024). The region is known for its rich resources of traditional Dong handicrafts, which have been perpetuated through

intergenerational transmission between families and masters and apprentices, preserving traditional skills and unique artistic styles. These handicrafts not only carry the essence of Dong culture but are also an important part of the local economy and cultural preservation (Xu, 2018; Zhou, 2017; Chen, 2010). For example, Dong embroidery is renowned for its intricate patterns and skill, while Dong silver jewelry is esteemed for its delicate designs and forging methods (Liang, Wei, Wen, 2021; Zhou, 2017). These handicrafts, crafted by artisans who integrate traditional methods with cultural elements, act as carriers of Dong culture and its heritage (Shi, Yan, Deng, Qin, 2018).

In 2006, China initiated the protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) with significant historical, literary, artistic and scientific value at all levels (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2006). Since May 2024 Sanjiang Dong Autonomous District have registered 175 items for ICH protection, among which a third are traditional handicrafts (Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County Cultural Centre, 2024). The promotion of ICH has invigorated traditional handicrafts, integrating them into the local economy. The transition from a planned to a market economy, especially post-1990, facilitated the growth of the handicraft industry, offering broader markets and international exposure. Nevertheless, the industrialization process and intensified market competition challenge these traditional crafts to adapt to modern consumer demands for personalized and diverse products (Qiu, 2019; Fan, 2019; Yang, Shafi, Song, Yang, 2018; Shafi, Junrong, Yang, Jian, Rahman, & Moudi, 2021).

Given these evolving market conditions, this study explores consumer preferences for traditional Dong handicrafts, aiming to provide a theoretical basis for new product development. Specifically, it seeks to understand the balance consumers desire between preserving cultural authenticity and incorporating modern design elements. The study evaluates consumer preferences by examining supply and demand, quantifying product appeal, and determining expectations for the incorporation of modern design into Dong handicrafts. The research is to provide actionable insights that enable artisans and enterprises to optimize their product offers and marketing strategies to address consumer demands and improve market competitiveness.

By diversifying product offerings, enhancing workmanship, and refining branding, Dong handicrafts can both safeguard their traditional legacy and meet contemporary customer demands. These findings can inform municipal strategies to promote the sustainable growth of the Dong handicraft industry, assuring cultural preservation and economic sustainability (Liu, Alli, & Yusoff, 2024; Jia, 2018).

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The study analyzes how traditional Dong handicrafts may meet modern customer demands while preserving their culture. Maintaining ethnic authenticity while combining creative designs to attract modern consumers is difficult. Research reveals that combining cultural identification and emotional value with modern design helps preserve these handicrafts' cultural character and boost their market competitiveness (Xu, 2018; Qiu, 2019). Dong handicrafts,

known for their rich workmanship and cultural connotation, must survive globalisation and consumer trends without losing their attractiveness (Yang et al., 2018). This study examines customer preferences to inform product innovation and cultural preservation and economic viability methods (Jia, 2018; Liu et al., 2024).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Consumer behavior and product development of traditional handicrafts have become a hot research topic in academia. Theoretically, analyzing consumer preferences and behaviors can enrich the understanding of cultural heritage in the context of modern consumer dynamics and provide a basis for brand building, market positioning, and consumer relationship management (Liu, Alli, & Yusoff, 2024). Indeed, insights into consumer preferences can help artisans and sellers refine their strategies and improve their market competitiveness. This market-oriented approach supports the sustainable development of traditional crafts and revitalizes them in the modern world (Jia, 2018).

Xu (2018) points out that innovation and creativity play a crucial role in the modernization and development of traditional handicrafts, especially in the context of globalization and industrialization, traditional handicrafts need to remain competitive in the marketplace through innovation. Zhou (2017), in his study of Dong silver jewelry, finds that the cultural context of handicrafts has a significant impact on consumers' purchasing decisions, especially in the areas of cultural identity and emotional value, and that cultural elements are important factors in attracting consumers to handicrafts. Sun and Wu (2024) stated that cultural perception, product perceived value, social factors, and marketing have a significant impact on consumer decision-making for intangible cultural heritage cultural and creative products.

Meanwhile, Qiu (2019) discusses the transformation of the Chinese handicraft industry in the modern market, noting that personalized design and product differentiation are crucial to attracting modern consumers. With the deepening of the market economy, one of the biggest challenges facing traditional handicrafts is how to balance the contradiction between traditional cultural heritage and the demands of the modern market. Fan (2019) further emphasizes that innovative products for traditional handicrafts can not only enhance their market competitiveness but also gain a foothold in the international market.

In addition, Yang et al.'s (2018) study points out that the traditional handicraft industry in the context of globalization must adapt to the needs of the international market, especially in terms of product design and marketing strategies. By introducing modern design concepts combined with traditional skills, handicrafts can attract more young consumers and enhance their competitiveness in the global market. Liu et al. (2024) also mentioned that consumers are not only concerned about the functional attributes of products but also their cultural value and quality. This further proves that handicrafts that reflect deep cultural heritage are more likely to gain consumers' recognition and favor.

Based on the above research, this thesis aims to provide theoretical support for product development and market strategies in this field by thematically analyzing the consumer preferences for traditional handicrafts of the Dong people in Sanjiang. This not only helps the innovative development of Dong handicrafts in the modern market but also provides a new perspective for theoretical research in related fields.

### METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examined Sanjiang Dong consumer preferences and expectations for traditional handicrafts. Face-to-face informal interviews gave in-depth customer behavior insights. The study's method captured consumers' cultural and emotional attachment to Dong handicrafts and their struggles to adjust to modern market demands. The sample included 40 varied consumers from eight major Dong traditional handicraft sales venues. This study examines customer expectations for Dong handicrafts using informal interviews and theme analysis.

### RESULT AND ANALYSIS

**Consumers' views on the existing products of traditional handicrafts of the Dong people**  
To understand the view of consumers on Sanjiang Dong traditional handicrafts, to judge the supply and demand situation of existing products, and to provide ideas and bases for the development of new products, at this stage, interviews were conducted in eight sales venues in Dong traditional handicrafts with the theme of consumers’ views on the supply and demand situation of existing products, and the following are the results and analyses of the interviews.

**Table 1:** The Current Status of Product Supply and Demand

Respondents	Respondent Responses	Codes	Themes
1. Sex: Male Origin: Other province Age group: 30-59 Education: Undergraduate Interview Location: Sanjiang Chengyang Bazhai Scenic Spot	“I just came from Yangshuo, I feel that some handicrafts are more common here, and these products should not be unique to their area, such as paper fans, shoe plucks, backpacks, batiks, and I've seen similar products in Yangshuo, so I didn't buy them.”	High degree of product homogeneity	Lack of Product distinctiveness

Respondents	Respondent Responses	Codes	Themes
2. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Interview Location: Sanjiang Yueya Dong Village Scenic Spot	"There is still many types of products for sale here, there are quite a lot of daily necessities, but they are all designed with paintings onto the products, which is a bit of a single form. I also saw some trinkets made of embroidery and Dong cloth."	Limited Design Variety	Lack of Product Diversity
3. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Interview Location: Liuzhou Creative Bazaar	"I often come to the Creative Bazaar, every time I come, I see the same Dong products, only some embroidery products. Last year I bought a doll made of embroidery, I haven't seen any new products since."	Limited New Variety Over Time	
4. Sex: Male Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Educational: Undergraduate Interview Location: Liuzhou Baili Liujiang Scenic Spot	"The styles and types of products on display here are too traditional, there are no fashionable products that meet my needs."	Rejection of Traditional Styles, Desire for Fashionable Items	Traditional vs. Modern Appeal
5. Sex: Male Origin: Guangxi Age group: 30-59 Educational: Junior college Interview Location: Liuzhou Arts and Crafts Exhibition Venue	"There are still quite a lot of Dong products here, and I think they are also very delicately designed."	Appreciation for Delicate Design	Intricacy and Delicacy
6. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Interview Location:	"I saw that the Dong handicraft products sold here are all cloth-based, such as clothing, handbags and scarves, they are all very distinctive, I bought a scarf to give to my mum."	Appreciation for distinctive design, Appreciation for Cloth-Based Products	

Respondents	Respondent Responses	Codes	Themes
Guangxi Arts and Crafts Exhibition Venue			
7. Sex: Female			
Origin: Other province	"I think it would be nice to buy the products here back as a collector's item, but I don't have a collecting hobby."	Traditional styles	
Age group: 20-29			
Education: Postgraduate			
Interview Location:			
National Crafts Fair			
8. Sex: Male			Tradition and Innovation
Origin: Overseas	"I saw that there were Dong architectural models and Dong costumes on display, as well as some carrier bags and scarves, but the form of the products was rather traditional, and it might be better if there were some fashion items."	Rejection of traditional styles, Desire for Fashionable Items	
Age group: 30-59			
Education:			
Undergraduate			
Interview Location:			
China ASEAN Tourism Expo (CATE)			

Respondents' comments regarding Dong products at the place of sale revealed a spectrum of perspectives on whether the variety of offerings meet their demand for purchase. While some respondents commended the intricacy and delicacy of Dong products, others voiced concerns about the lack of diversity and modern appeal. Specifically, individuals highlighted encountering familiar items like paper fans and backpacks, indicating a need for more unique and distinctive offerings to fulfill consumer expectations. Moreover, criticisms regarding the limited variety over time, particularly with recurring embroidery items, shed light on a potential issue with product diversity that could lead to consumer fatigue and decreased interest over time.

However, despite these criticisms, there is widespread appreciation for the craftsmanship and attention to detail evident in cloth-based products such as scarves and handbags. This suggests that while Dong products possess undeniable quality and craftsmanship, there is room for improvement in terms of diversifying the product range to cater to evolving consumer preferences. Additionally, the diversity in consumer preferences, ranging from valuing collectability to desiring products that meet immediate or contemporary needs, underscores the importance of catering to a wide range of tastes and interests within the market.

While Dong products exhibit remarkable quality and craftsmanship, addressing concerns about diversity and modern appeal is crucial to better align with consumer expectations and enhance overall market appeal. Introducing a wide range of unique and contemporary offerings alongside traditional items could attract a wider consumer base while still preserving the essence of Dong culture and heritage. This approach not only satisfies

consumer demands but also ensures the longevity and relevance of Dong products in an ever-evolving marketplace.

### Popularity of the Product

To explore the popularity of the existing products of Sanjiang Dong traditional handicrafts and to provide ideas and bases for the development of new product strategies, consumers were interviewed at this stage on the theme of their favorite products, and the following are the results and analyses of the interviews.

**Table 2: Product Popularity**

Respondents	Respondent responses	Codes	Themes
1. Sex: Female Origin: Other province Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Location: Sanjiang Chengyang Bazhai Scenic Spot	"I prefer the embroidered products sold here, their patterns are very attractive to me, but the grannies selling them cannot tell me what the symbols mean because they all speak Dong and I don't understand them. If I buy them, I don't know what to do with them."	Preference for Embroidered Products, Desire to Frame Embroidery	Preference for Embroidery
2. Sex: Female Origin: Other province Age group: 30-59 Educational: Junior college Location : Sanjiang Yueya Dong Village Scenic Spot	"The fabric products sold here are more unique, and my favourites are embroidered products and small dolls made with embroidery."	Unique Fabric Products, Wall Hangings and Dolls	Unique Fabric Products
3. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Location: Liuzhou Creative Bazaar	"I prefer the earrings sold here. It combines embroidery and silver jewelry in a very beautiful way."	Attraction to Earrings, Combining Embroidery and Silver Jewelry	Attraction to Embroidered Jewelry
4. Sex: Male Origin: Guangxi Age group: 60+ Educational : Less than junior college degree Location : Liuzhou Baili Liujiang Scenic Spot	"I like the architectural models of the Dong ethnic group very much. Before I came to Liuzhou, I heard that all ethnic groups here have their own characteristics, Dong architecture, Miao songs and Yao dances."	Appreciation for Dong Architectural Models, Overall Affection for Dong Products	Appreciation for Dong Culture
5. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi	"I preferred the embroidered products, each pattern was	Preference for Embroidered	Preference for

Respondents	Respondent responses	Codes	Themes
Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Location: Liuzhou Arts and Crafts Exhibition Venue	very beautiful and colourful, and the craftsmen told me stories about some of the patterns, which really appealed to me."	Products, pattern	Embroidery
6. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Educational: Junior college Location: Guangxi Arts and Crafts Exhibition Venue	"The earrings, bracelets, and pendants made with embroidery appealed to me, and I loved all of these products."	Attraction to Earrings, bracelet made with embroidery	Attraction to Embroidered red Jewelry
7. Sex: Male Origin: Other province Age group: 30-59 Education: Undergraduate Location: National Crafts Fair	"I purchased an embroidery product that I love so much I'm going to frame it and hang it in my home."	Preference for Embroidered Products, pattern	Preference for Embroidery
8. Sex: Female Origin: Overseas Age group: 45-59 Education: Undergraduate Location: China ASEAN Tourism Expo (CATE)	"I like Dong products very much, I like architectural models, costumes and embroidery. I have already purchased two embroidery products."	Appreciation for Dong Architectural Models, costumes, embroidery	Appreciation for Dong Culture

Based on respondent interviews and the identified themes, it's apparent that certain product categories stand out for their popularity in the current sales landscape. Embroidered products emerge as a clear frontrunner, celebrated for their intricate designs and the narrative richness they offer. Similarly, unique fabric items such as wall hangings and dolls garner attention for their distinctiveness and allure. Specifically, respondents express a preference for earrings that seamlessly blend embroidery with silver jewelry, admiring the aesthetic elegance of this combination. Moreover, there's an admiration for Dong cultural items, including architectural models and embroidered products, indicating a broad fascination with cultural heritage and traditions.

However, while these identified product categories enjoy acclaim, it's imperative to approach these findings critically. While embroidered products and Dong cultural items may currently dominate consumer preferences, businesses must remain cognizant to shifting market dynamics and evolving tastes. Over-reliance on specific product categories risks stagnation and



limits opportunities for innovation and growth. Therefore, while acknowledging the current popularity of certain products, it's essential for businesses to maintain a diverse range of offerings, continuously adapting to meet changing demands. By doing so, businesses can ensure sustained relevance and appeal in the marketplace, fostering long-term success and customer satisfaction.

While embroidered products, unique fabric items, embroidered jewelry, and Dong cultural items are perceived as more popular among consumers where they are currently sold, it's essential for businesses to remain vigilant and responsive to evolving consumer preferences. Maintaining a diverse range of offerings ensures continued relevance and appeal in the marketplace, contributing to long-term success and customer satisfaction.

### Ideas for Improvement of Product Range

The purpose of this stage was to solicit consumers' opinions and collect their suggestions for improvement of the traditional handicraft product categories of the Sanjiang Dong ethnic group to provide ideas and bases for the development of new product strategies. Therefore, consumers were interviewed in this stage with the theme of suggestions for expected product improvements, and the following are the results and analyses of the interviews.

**Table 3:** Product Category Improvement Ideas

Respondents	Respondent Responses	Codes	Themes
1. Sex: Male Origin: Other province Age group: 30-59 Education: Junior college Location: Sanjiang Chengyang Bazhai Scenic Spot	"I like this place very much, the architecture, ethnic customs and costumes are all very unique, they deeply attract me, I want to buy some souvenirs that can represent this place to go back to collect or give to my friends, but I don't see any suitable ones."  "I think the architecture here is very distinctive and if there are some artefacts of architectural models I would consider buying them as souvenirs."	Absence of Suitable Souvenirs  Desire for Architectural Models	Lack of Representati on in Souvenirs  Preference for Architectura l Models
2. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Junior college Location: Sanjiang Yueya Dong Village Scenic Spot	"I think the Dong people are very creative, and they have combined bamboo woven dustpans with peasant paintings, which is very special. But the works are still rather rough. I think the bamboo woven dustpan can be woven more delicately, [and it] will be better."	Improvement in Craft	Craft Improvemen t

Respondents	Respondent Responses	Codes	Themes
3. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Location: Liuzhou Creative Bazaar	"I think [if] we [have] the Dong symbols and designs in some children's products, I would be very willing to buy them, and I would like to give my daughter a better understanding of minority cultures."	Incorporation of Dong Symbols in Children's Product	Cultural Education through Children's Products
4. Sex: Male Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Location: Liuzhou Baili Liujiang Scenic Spot	"All of their products are fascinating, and it would be better if the products added something smaller in size so that it's easier for us who come from out of town to carry them back."	Smaller-sized Products	Need for Portability
5. Sex: Male Origin: Guangxi Age group: 20-29 Education: Undergraduate Location: Liuzhou Arts and Crafts Exhibition Venue	"I think all of their products are great and would be great as a collector's item. I would consider purchasing them if they were designed in conjunction with items that are commonly used in everyday life."	Integration with Everyday Items	Integration with Everyday Use Items
6. Sex: Female Origin: Guangxi Age group: 30-59 Education: Undergraduate Location: Guangxi Arts and Crafts Exhibition Venue	"I see a lot of ethnic minority products here, but I can't tell the differences between them, I don't know which ones are Dong, which ones are Miao or Yao."	Clarity in Product Differentiation	Clarity in Product Differentiation
7. Sex: Male Origin: Other province Age group: 30-59 Education: Junior college	"I saw a lot of handicrafts from ethnic minorities at the show, and if I put them together, I couldn't tell which ethnic group they belonged to."		

Respondents	Respondent Responses	Codes	Themes
Location: National Crafts Fair			
8. Sex: Female Origin: Overseas Age group: 30-59 Education: Undergraduate Location: China ASEAN Tourism Expo (CATE)	"I saw that both the Miao and Dong booths had very distinctive products, but I couldn't tell the differences between them."		

Dong product categories needed upgrading, according to respondents. Firstly, the lack of souvenirs expressing the Dong's unique culture is disappointing. This lack of representation hinders cultural exchange and fails to satisfy travelers seeking authentic mementos. Respondents also wanted architectural models that captured the region's buildings' unique qualities, suggesting a wasted opportunity to market local landmarks as relics. Dong craftsmen's ingenuity is recognized, yet some products, especially bamboo weaving, are made with rough craftsmanship. This criticism emphasizes the necessity to improve artisanal skills to match commercial standards for quality.

Adding Dong symbols to children's products promotes cultural education and emphasizes the necessity of passing on cultural heritage. Smaller products are preferred for portability, especially by visitors, indicating a need for product modification to meet their needs. Respondents also propose merging Dong products with everyday objects to boost their utility and appeal, missing an opportunity to promote them as functional daily goods. Finally, uncertainty over Dong products versus those of other ethnic minority groups presents branding and market positioning issues. This ambiguity may hurt consumer trust and loyalty, therefore Dong products need clearer demarcation and branding to stand out. Respondent input helps Dong product categories improve, but it also highlights key issues that must be addressed to improve market competitiveness and suit consumer wants. Dong products can better meet consumer tastes and gain market share by focusing high craftsmanship, cultural representation, and clear branding.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that consumers' preferences for Dong traditional handicraft products are diversified and generally show expectations for innovative product improvements. Consumers generally recognize the cultural connotations and exquisite craftsmanship of Dong handicrafts, but they put forward higher demands in terms of product innovation, especially the call for

incorporating modern elements into product design to meet personalized needs. Specifically, consumers hope that products can be combined with modern design aesthetics to maintain the characteristics of traditional craftsmanship while meeting the aesthetic and functional needs of modern consumers. Younger consumers are more likely to accept handicrafts with innovative designs, middle-aged women favor children's toys and children's products with educational functions, while older consumers are more concerned about the cultural value of products. In addition, the study reveals the lack of diversity and unclear brand differentiation in the handicrafts market, pointing out the direction of future product development and market strategies.

By analyzing consumer preferences, this study provides an important reference for product development and market positioning of Dong handicrafts, which has important theoretical and practical significance. Firstly, in terms of theory, the findings enrich the understanding of consumer behavior of traditional handicrafts and reveal the interactive relationship between consumer preferences for cultural products and modern market demand. This has reference value for academics to further explore the balance between cultural heritage and marketability. Second, in terms of practice, the results of this study will directly help developers of Dong handicrafts to optimize their product design and marketing strategies and enhance their market competitiveness. Thirdly, the results of the study also provide policy recommendations for local governments in protecting and promoting the Dong handicraft industry, which will help balance the relationship between cultural heritage and market demand. In addition, this study provides a new perspective in the field of visual arts education. Traditional Dong handicrafts are not only a carrier of cultural heritage but also serve as an important content of art education. Introducing traditional handicrafts into the visual arts curriculum it can help students understand the cultural values behind the crafts and stimulate their interest in traditional arts.

Finally, this study enriches the theoretical knowledge of the consumption behavior of traditional handicraft products and provides a basis for the practice of the development of traditional handicraft products of the Sanjiang Dong ethnic group. However, due to time and resource constraints, the sample selection scope of this study was mainly biased toward the selection of the eight major product sales venues, which lacked breadth in terms of quantity and scope and, to a certain extent, affected the analysis of the data and the presentation of the results. However, in conducting the interview transcripts and data analysis, the researcher sought to present the statements and opinions of the interviewees in their original form, aiming to maintain the richness and authenticity of the data. In the future, a mixed research method can be used to add quantitative research methods, such as questionnaire surveys and statistical analyses, on top of qualitative research to obtain more comprehensive and objective data and to present views and conclusions of more theoretical and practical guidance.

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