

Cultural Metaphorical Mapping in Ethnic Fashion Design: An Ethnographic Design Study of Guizang

Article Info	Abstract
Article type: <i>Research Article</i> Article history: Received: [date] Received in revised form: [date] Accepted: [date] Available online: [date] Keywords: <i>culturally intensive fashion design, culturally oriented product design, inscultural piration, metaphorical mapping, ethnographic design, cultural sustainability</i>	Cultural sustainability in fashion design requires approaches that move beyond the visual reproduction of cultural elements towards situated interpretation and meaningful transformation. Our previous studies on culturally oriented product design (COPD) developed a metaphorical mapping method to translate cultural inspiration (CI) from both tangible and intangible culture into contemporary product designs (Authors et al., 2025; Author, 2025). However, these studies focused primarily on the relationships between cultural characteristics and design outcomes within field-based research, without attention to how cultural interpretations are grounded in fashion design with authentic cultural settings. Addressing this gap, the present study conceptualises <i>Guizang</i> (归藏) as a culturally intensive and participatory approach to fashion design. Through a university-enterprise collaboration across Kunming City and the Xizang Autonomous Region, China, we employed an ethnographic design approach to conduct design-based research for cultural heritage in Xizang, in which field-based observation, garment design and production, presentation, and reflection remained interconnected. The materials, including photos, sketches, textual notes, recorded verbal explanations, and garment designs, were collected and analysed. The findings further demonstrate how field-based cultural immersion enhances designers' contextualised fashion design. The study, therefore, extends earlier COPD research by positioning <i>Guizang</i> as a culturally contextualised approach to culturally intensive fashion design.

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Introduction

Cultural heritage has become an important source of knowledge, identity, and value creation in contemporary fashion design (Araya & Beyene, 2024). Traditional dress, craft practices, visual symbols, rituals, and local knowledge can provide designers with cultural resources that connect continuity and contemporary innovation. Such resources may support creative industries and cultural sustainability by enabling cultural heritage to acquire renewed meanings in contemporary contexts (Chai et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017; Qin et al., 2019). However, the transformation of cultural heritage into contemporary fashion requires more than the visual reproduction of traditional motifs or forms. When cultural inspiration (CI) is extracted primarily for aesthetic or commercial purposes without sufficient understanding of its cultural contexts, design outcomes may become superficial, decontextualised, or appropriative (Zhang et al., 2017; Park & Chun, 2023). Cultural sustainability, therefore, requires approaches that support situated cultural interpretation and meaningful transformation. Our previous studies on culturally oriented product design (COPD) developed the metaphorical mapping method to translate CI across cultural levels into contemporary product design concepts with field-based research (Authors et al., 2025; Author, 2025). In this sense, COPD highlights the importance of investigating regional and/or ethnicity-based cultural groups. It provides a field-based research method for investigating culture, identifying cultural values, and transforming them into product forms. These studies showed that local cultural characteristics can operate across different levels, ranging from visible features to practices, symbolic associations, values, beliefs, memories, and related meanings. The cultural three-level framework provided a means of linking these cultural characteristics from local to design outcomes. It demonstrated that COPD can extend beyond the mere reproduction of visual aspects. However, earlier studies focused primarily on the relationships between specific cultural characteristics and the resulting design concepts. Less attention was given to how designers develop the cultural understanding required for such metaphorical transformation, particularly through encounters with authentic cultural experience and fashion design. Ethnographic and participatory approaches provide an important basis for addressing this limitation because they enable designers to encounter cultural meanings through observation, participation, dialogue, embodied experience, and reflection (Bernard, 2017; Pink et al., 2022; Öz & Timur, 2023; Merzali & Hamarat, 2022; Hodson et al., 2023). Such engagement can progressively familiarise designers with cultural contexts and help them recognise relationships among visible cultural forms and practices, the symbolic associations they carry, and the underlying meanings. Participants and cultural knowledge holders may also contribute contextual explanations, practical knowledge, and situated perspectives that cannot be obtained through visual observation alone.

The present study develops culturally intensive design as a more situated, participatory, and contextually grounded development within COPD. Whereas COPD provides the broader conceptual basis for linking tangible cultural characteristics to intangible meanings, culturally intensive design emphasises the contextual conditions through which these meanings are encountered and acquired. In this study, the progressive development of cultural understanding is described as contextual familiarisation, which emerges through designers' engagement with five dimensions: material, craft-making, embodied, ritual-symbolic, and spatial. The study examines *Guizang* (归藏), a contemporary fashion project developed through a university-enterprise collaboration across Kunming City and the Xizang Autonomous Region, China. The project integrated professional fashion practice with field-based cultural engagement, fashion design, production, presentation, and reflection. Rather than treating *Guizang* simply as a fashion-production project, the study conceptualises it as a culturally intensive and participatory design process in which designers encountered, gained, and materialised situated cultural knowledge. In *Guizang*, the Chinese character *zang* (藏) carries two relevant meanings and pronunciations. Pronounced *cáng*, it refers to storing, preserving, containing, and allowing meaning to accumulate; pronounced *zàng*, it refers to the Xizang region. This, therefore, expects both geographical situatedness and an inward process through which cultural experience is accumulated, interpreted, and transformed through design. Methodologically, we

conducted ethnographic research on fashion design, production, presentation, and narration to understand designers' outcomes, using the metaphorical mapping framework for analysis. Accordingly, the study addresses two research questions: **RQ1. How is CI transformed into contemporary fashion design across the three cultural levels? RQ2. How does field-based cultural immersion enhance designers' cultural interpretation and transformation?** By addressing these questions, the study extends our earlier COPD research, moving from analysing relationships between CI and design outcomes to examining situated cultures and interpretations. This positions *Guizang* as a culturally contextualised approach to culturally intensive fashion design, involving a sequential process of ethnographic engagement, contextual familiarisation, professional fashion design, and framework analyses.

Theoretical Background

2.1 Culturally Intensive Design and Cultural Inspiration

Culture-intensive products derive value not only from their functional or commercial qualities but also from the cultural meanings, narratives, practices, and identities embedded within them (Bertola et al., 2016). From this perspective, design innovation involves processes of re-signification through which existing cultural meanings are interpreted and transformed into new forms, experiences, and narratives. This perspective is particularly relevant to culturally oriented fashion design, where local cultural heritage, traditional cultural properties, craft knowledge, symbolic systems, and lived cultural practices can be drawn on in contemporary design. Cultural inspiration (CI) plays an important role in this transformation. Luo and Dong (2017) describe CI as visual and textual sources that support the generation of new cultural products, while Dong et al. (2023) conceptualise cultural transformation through processes of identification, translation, and implementation. However, cultural resources extend beyond visible forms to include practices, social contexts, narratives, values, and symbolic meanings (Vanni & Crosby, 2023; Khodashenas & Gilani, 2025) as well as the application of product-service system (PSS) approaches to optimising social services (Author, 2024). Culturally intensive design, therefore, requires more than reproducing motifs or stylistic features; it requires designers to interpret the cultural contexts from which these features emerge and to determine how they may be appropriately transformed into contemporary design. Our previous field-based studies developed a metaphorical mapping approach for this purpose (Authors et al., 2025; Author, 2025). The studies identified three cultural levels—outer, intermediate, and inner—through which CI could be interpreted from visible characteristics towards deeper meanings. The framework demonstrated how designers could establish metaphorical relationships between cultural sources and contemporary product-design concepts. However, the previous studies focused primarily on how the identified CI was mapped into design concepts. This provided less explanation of how designers become sufficiently familiar with cultural contexts to enhance transformative design. The present study addresses this theoretical gap by conceptualising *Guizang* as a culturally contextualised approach to culturally intensive design. In this approach, CI is not treated as a predefined collection of cultural elements. Instead, it progressively emerges through designers' encounters with cultural practices and experiences.

2.2 Ethnographic Design

Ethnographic design provides an important basis for culturally contextualised design because it enables designers to engage with culture in the settings where cultural meanings are produced and experienced. It emphasises situated knowledge, direct engagement, participation, observation, interaction, and reflection (Bernard, 2017; Pink et al., 2022; Vanni & Crosby, 2023; Hodson et al., 2023). In culturally intensive design, local participants, craftspeople, cultural practitioners, designers, and researchers may contribute different cultural knowledge and experience. Ethnographic research, therefore, allows designers to move beyond cultural elements as visual references and understand how materials, artefacts, practices, places,

rituals, memories, and values are interconnected. Such engagement can contribute to more contextualised cultural interpretation and reduce the risk of symbolic simplification or decontextualised appropriation (Merzali & Hamarat, 2022; Öz & Timur, 2023). Field observation, participant observation, interviews, visual documentation, field notes, and cultural immersion provide access to both tangible and intangible cultural dimensions. Tangible dimensions may involve materials, artefacts, and visible forms, whereas intangible dimensions involve practices, experiences, stories, values, and other meanings. These dimensions are not treated as independent categories; rather, ethnographic engagement helps designers understand the relationships among them. Within the present study, this process is understood as cultural contextualisation: the progressive development of cultural understanding through situated encounters with cultural environments and practices. This extends our previous metaphorical-mapping research by adding an important contextual dimension. The *Guizang* design study examines how field-based engagement contributes to the formation of the cultural understanding that enables such mappings. Accordingly, *Guizang* integrates ethnographic engagement, cultural contextualisation, professional fashion practice, and metaphorical mapping. Cultural contextualisation provides the situated cultural understanding, while metaphorical mapping provides a means of transforming this understanding in fashion design.

2.3 The Metaphorical Mapping Framework

According to the previous study (Authors et al., 2025), the metaphorical mapping framework distinguishes three layers of culture (Figure 1). (1) The outer layer corresponds to the tangible category and is related to physical and material culture, such as daily objects and tools. (2) The intermediate layer corresponds to the social and behavioural activities (i.e., rituals and customs) required to build a connection with the outer layer and the inner conceptual layer. (3) The inner layer corresponds to an intangible category (spiritual or ideal culture) that works as the core value to stimulate cultural thinking and association. The basic idea behind COPD is to use metaphors to map two distinct, previously unrelated ideas, producing a new hybrid idea. The three levels provide the designer with the physical and cultural experience needed to trigger the metaphorical connection (Vanni & Crosby, 2023). In other words, new cultural meaning emerges when the cultural features of the source element and the target elements of contemporary fashion are mapped onto one another. The outer layer concerns visceral aspects such as colour, texture, form, decoration, surface pattern, and material; the intermediate layer concerns function, wearing, interaction, rituals, and customs; and the inner layer concerns reflective design with special content, such as stories, emotions, identity, and cultural meanings. The diagrammatic tool enables researchers to interpret the designer's intention by analysing the levels of cultural sources and their transformation into design outcomes. It was originally examined with the product designers to analyse various Chinese ethnic cultural elements in new product design concepts. In the present study, the framework is extended from product design to fashion design to examine how CI was transformed through fashion design. Previous studies used the three levels of the cultural hierarchy to provide new insights into how to improve and adapt design practices for COPD (Authors et al., 2025; Author, 2025).

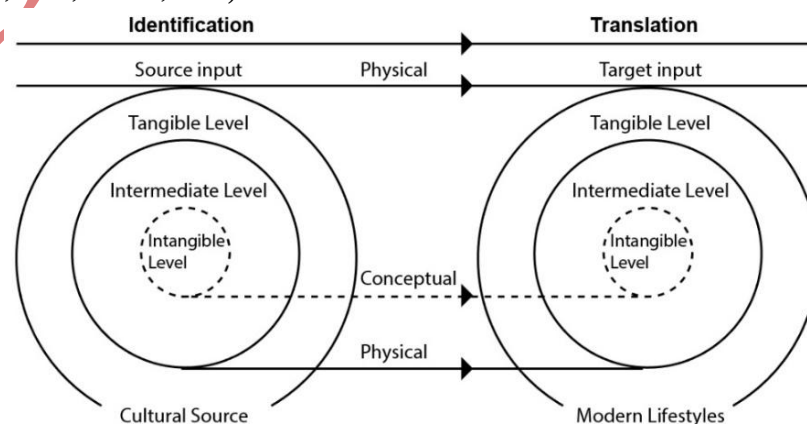


Figure 1. The metaphorical mapping framework for creating contemporary fashion design

Methodology

This study aimed to understand how professional fashion designers transformed CI through framework analyses and how field-based cultural immersion supported culturally intensive design. The researchers and designers participated in the design project while engaging with relevant cultural contexts. The dataset comprised textual, verbal, and visual materials generated throughout the design process. The research methodology integrated professional fashion design activities with ethnographic field research (Roque et al., 2024; Authors et al., 2025; Author, 2025).

3.1 Design Project-Based Research

The present study was conducted in collaboration between XXX and XXX (anonymised for review) across two locations in Kunming and the Xizang Autonomous Region, and involved fieldwork at multiple selected sites in Xizang. The *Guizang* project followed a four-stage process integrating fashion design-based research, local cultural engagement, garment design and production, and fashion show. The project centred on the *Guizang* design concept, in which the Chinese character 藏 is pronounced cāng; it means storing, preserving, containing, cultivating inwardness, and allowing meaning to accumulate over time. The team subsequently presented the completed garments at the *Guizang* fashion show. It comprised four stages: pre-field preparation; in-field cultural immersion and design development; post-field design development and presentation; and post-field reflection and analysis, as shown in Table 1. After the fieldwork, the team analysed the collected materials and refined the fashion designs in the studio in Kunming. In collaboration with garment makers and the fashion-show production team, we completed the garments, styling, makeup, and stage design, culminating in a fashion show in Kunming and a cultural narrative in Xizang. Cultural narrative fashion extends beyond fabric and form; it functions as a medium through which stories, emotions, identities, and cultural meanings are communicated to audiences. While clothing is often valued for its visual appeal, contemporary fashion increasingly reflects personal and cultural experiences, identities, and meanings.

Table 1: A four-stage collaborative process

Stages	Aims	Methods	Participants
Pre-field preparation	Become familiar with relevant locations, conduct preliminary surveys, identify cultural resources, and prepare for fieldwork.	Literature review; preliminary surveys; site visits; semi-structured discussions	Local instructors, designers, and researchers
In-field cultural immersion	Conduct participant observation in local communities and at cultural heritage sites to become familiar with cultural resources, practices, and meanings.	Community and heritage-site visits; field observation; inquiry; interviews; sketching	Local people, including guides, craftspeople, residents, designers, and researchers
Post-field design development and presentation	Refine design concepts, produce garments, and communicate the collection through styling, fashion-show presentation, and culturally contextualised narration.	Garment design and production; styling; fashion-show production; culturally contextualised narration	Designers, garment makers, fashion-show team, researchers
Post-field reflection and analysis	Analyse and evaluate field-based experiences, design decisions, and completed outcomes through interviews and cultural mapping analysis.	Semi-structured interviews; metaphorical mapping framework	Designers, researchers, and relevant production participants

3.2 Participants and Ethnographic Contexts

The six-month design study primarily involved a team comprising fashion designers, garment producers, and researchers who participated in the four-stage process. Professional guides from a long-term

collaborative travel agency participated locally and assisted the team in accessing and guiding the field sites in Xizang. Field research in Xizang for half a month provided a distinctive context for exploring ethnographic practice and culturally intensive design at multiple selected sites. The fieldwork followed an extended circular route that began and ended in Lhasa. It covered multiple culturally and geographically distinct sites across southern and western Xizang, including the border areas of Shannan, Kula Kangri, and Shigatse; the southern Ngari route; the Mount Kailash circuit; Zanda Earth Forest; and the Qiangtang lake region. Drawing on related ethnographic methods, the field research incorporated participant observation (PO) to examine culturally situated activities, practices, and experiences. The context relevant to this study concerns Tibetan ethnicity and culture. The Zang (Tibetan) ethnic group is known in Chinese as *Zangzu* (藏族). Tibetan communities live primarily in the Xizang Autonomous Region, China and in Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Gansu. Tibetan languages belong to the Tibetic branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. According to Kang (2005), Tibetan Buddhist culture, together with locally situated beliefs and practices, constitutes an important dimension of traditional Tibetan culture. Temples, murals, thangka paintings, textiles, ritual objects, traditional clothing, and other forms of material culture serve as visible and symbolic expressions of local cultural traditions. Their forms and meanings vary according to location, cultural tradition, and local context.

3.3 Data Collection and Analyses

The research focused on cultural heritage in Xizang, examining the interconnections between visual-material and intangible culture. The collected materials provided evidence of both the designers' sources of CI and their interpretations and transformations. Cultural transformation, therefore, can be explored by analysing cultural sources that inform contemporary fashion design through the metaphorical mapping framework (cf. Authors et al., 2025; Author, 2025). As the project aimed to design and produce 21 complete garments for presentation at the fashion show, we collected data throughout the fieldwork and design-development process. To support this, the dataset comprised substantial procedural materials, including photos, field notes, recorded verbal explanations, sketches, and 21 garment designs. Drawing on the cultural three-lever analyses established in our previous studies, the identified cultural characteristics were organised into three interconnected levels: outer, intermediate, and inner. We analysed the data using holistic coding to identify CI sources and characteristics. The descriptive analysis involved two rounds of categorisation. First, we used designers' field notes, photographs, sketches, and verbal explanations to identify sources of CI. We coded these materials according to the cultural resources, experiences, practices, and meanings encountered during the field study. Second, according to the three-level structure (Table 2), we used the metaphorical mapping method to analyse how the identified CI sources were transformed into the design outcomes. Triangulation was achieved by comparing evidence across the collected data (Authors et al., 2025).

Table 2: The three-level structure and its subcategories

Cultural Level	Cultural Elements
Outer level: Corresponding to the tangible category, including visual symbols and artefacts, and typically represented through visible design elements.	Colour, pattern, materials, form, structure
Intermediate level: Corresponding to behavioural activities in traditional practices or contemporary lifestyles that can connect the outer and inner levels.	Craft skills, operation, function, and expression of customs
Inner level: Corresponding to intangible meanings and reflective design, and serving as a core level for stimulating cultural thinking and reflection (e.g., beliefs within ethnic cultures).	Spiritual values, beliefs, philosophical thinking, and aesthetics

Results

The analysis examined how CI, identified through field-based cultural immersion, was interpreted and transformed through framework analyses during the design development. Particular attention was given to relationships among cultural sources, designers' interpretations, and completed fashion outcomes, as well

as to how field engagement contributed to contextual familiarisation. The findings show that designers engaged with both visible cultural features and intangible cultural meanings. Ethnographic observation, direct cultural participation, collaborative dialogue, and reflective design supported this process. The three-level cultural framework, therefore, provides an analytical structure for tracing how CI was applied to contemporary fashion design.

4.1 The Fashion Design

Figures 2a-b present two selected designs from the *Guizang* fashion collection together with the cultural source associated with the square-circle concept. The key design feature is defined as a geometric pattern consisting of an inner square and an outer circle (see Figures 2a-b). The designers related this concept to architectural and symbolic forms encountered during the field research at the Sakya Temple (Figure 2c). Rather than treating the concept as a purely geometric motif, the designers interpreted it through the concept of *fangyuan* (方圆) and in relation to the traditional cosmological expression *tianyuan difang* (天圆地方, translated as round heaven and square earth), a meaning also discussed by Kang (2005). In the designers' interpretation, the square-circle relationship came to be associated with connections among heaven, earth, humanity, and the cosmos. Field investigation of other local architectural and cultural contexts, including the site currently identified in the field records as the Jebum-Gang Art Centre in Lhasa, Xizang, further contributed to reflection on these recurring visual and spatial qualities.

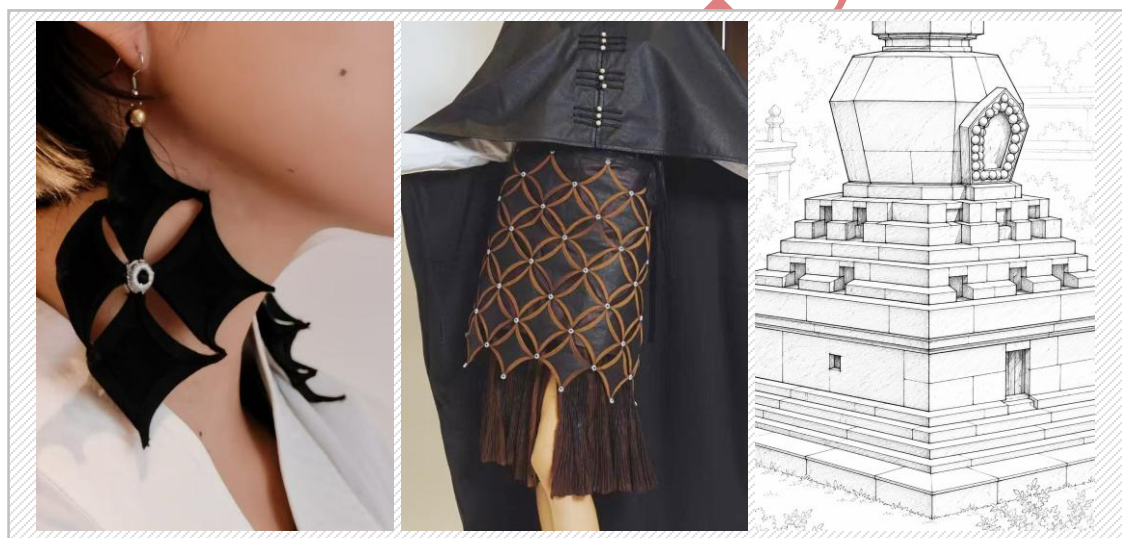


Figure 2a-c. Two design works (Figure 2a-b) were presented at the *Guizang* (归藏) fashion show. The earrings and garment designs were inspired by the *fangyuan* (方圆) philosophic meaning embodied at the Sakya Temple, as illustrated in the sketch (Figure 2c).

According to the metaphorical mapping framework, the designers used square and circular forms to map architectural sources of CI for creating a new fashion design. Rather than directly reproducing an architectural motif, the design reinterpreted its visual characteristics and perceived cultural meanings through fashion craftsmanship, structure, material, and other elements. In this way, *fangyuan* functioned as a cultural metaphor that structured both the design outcomes and the designers' contextual interpretation. At the outer level, the design abstracted the square-circle concept through colour, textiles, patterns, and composition. The source was simplified into an icon-based visual language, including repeated square and circular elements, while retaining the designers' associations with heaven, earth, and the cosmos. This transformation preserved recognisable visual characteristics while adapting them to contemporary fashion design. At the intermediate level, the square-circle relationship was translated into garment construction and wear. Circular and square components were produced through craft-making such as cutting, sewing,

fastening, patchworking, and assembly, embedding the motif structurally in the garment and, through visual perception, tactile interaction, movement, and wear, shifting the cultural reference from a static visual symbol to an embodied experience. At the inner level, the designers reframed the interconnected relationships among heaven, earth, humanity, and the cosmos as a metaphor for blessing, spirituality, and emotional well-being. In this contextualised design, the garment was positioned not only as a functional wearable but also as a culturally rich artefact associated with meanings such as comfort, blessing, well-being, and spirituality. These interpretations should be understood as outcomes of the designers' field-based meaning-making rather than as solely cultural meanings.

Figure 3a shows the fashion designs presented at the fashion show, while Figures 3b and 3c present the cultural narratives of the designs within local environments in Xizang. Beyond fabric and form, fashion designs serve as a medium for communicating stories, emotions, identities, and cultural meanings. Presenting the garments within culturally relevant environments, therefore, provided a situated visual narrative, enabling audiences to understand the fashion outcomes as culturally relevant content.



Figure 3a-c: Fashion outcomes presented at the Guizang fashion show (Figure 3a) in Kunming and within culturally relevant environments in Xizang (Figures 3b-c).

4.2 Field-Based Cultural Immersion

The field-based approach adopted in Xizang enabled designers to engage directly with Tibetan cultural heritage, local cultural practices, material culture, and culturally situated experiences. This engagement aligns with the ethnographic and participatory approaches discussed in the theoretical background, which emphasise situated observation and participation as key means of developing contextual understanding. Within this cultural immersion, personal experience played an important role in shaping designers' cultural understanding and subsequent design interpretations. Diverse forms of participant observation fostered opportunities for learning, knowledge sharing, and reflective dialogue among participants. In the present study, the findings were organised around five interconnected dimensions: material, craft-making, embodied, ritual-symbolic, and spatial. Specifically, the field research involved extensive observation and participation at the relevant sites in Xizang. Through visits to Tibetan cultural heritage sites, field observation, inquiry, interviews, visual documentation, and other engagements, designers became familiar with aspects of Tibetan material culture and relevant contexts (Kang, 2005). At the site identified in the field records as the Conch Cave of the Kaji Temple, the designers observed painters restoring local cultural heritage buildings and temple murals (Figure 4a). The murals included depictions of a prominent historical figure. According to explanations recorded during the field encounter, pigments used in the restoration were

derived from local mineral sources. Designers observed that the resulting colours related closely to the surrounding material environment and that the mural images made extensive use of relatively flat areas of filled colour. These observations provided insight into the material and visual characteristics of the craft-making practice encountered at the site. The designers also joined local people on sections of the kora route around Mount Kailash. The circumambulation route is commonly described as approximately 52 kilometres long, although the route length and completion practices vary. During the field study, designers encountered cultural heritage sites and practices described by local people and guides, including a practice, recorded in the field records as “finding the key,” at the Zhida Purri Temple (Figure 4b). During this physically demanding journey, designers walked together with local people (Figure 5) and experienced challenges associated with high-altitude travel, including fatigue, breathlessness, and physical discomfort. Their reflections indicate that mutual assistance became a salient aspect of the experience. Rather than treating journeys solely as an observable ritual, the designers encountered these journeys as embodied practices involving movement, endurance, interpersonal support, and culturally situated meaning. At the Sakya Temple, the designers requested a yellow textile object bearing a seal documented in the field records (Figure 4c). According to explanations received during the field encounter, the object was associated with blessing, protection, safety, and spiritual reassurance. Participation in this practice enabled designers to understand the object not simply as a material artefact or decorative textile, but as one whose significance depended on ritual context. Regarding the spatial dimension, field engagement at temples, journey routes, architectural settings, and other culturally relevant sites also enabled designers to understand cultural resources in relation to their spatial and environmental contexts. These situated encounters contributed to reflection on architecture, space, landscape, movement, and recurring visual and spatial qualities.

Through participation in and learning about Tibetan traditional cultures, designers developed more situated understandings of local cultural life. Interaction among craftspeople, guides, residents, designers, and researchers created opportunities for dialogue and knowledge sharing. These interactions supported reciprocal dialogue rather than positioning local people solely as sources of cultural information. Such dialogue was particularly important during field-based design activities. Local people shared perspectives on regional cultural resources, while the designers considered how garments, conceptualised as culturally intensive fashion artefacts, might responsibly engage with local cultural heritage. Discussions addressed how local cultural resources could inspire contemporary design without reducing them to detachable visual motifs. Traditional crafts and cultural products may provide both material and conceptual resources for contemporary design and can also contribute to the continuation, revitalisation, or reinterpretation of craft knowledge (Zhang et al., 2017; Authors et al., 2025).



Figure 4a-c: Participant observation through an immersive field-based approach. Figure 4a: designers observed mural restoration at the site identified in the field records as the Conch Cave of the Kajiu Temple. Figure 4b: field participation associated with the Mount Kailash journeys at the Zhida Purri Temple, including the practice translated in the field records as “finding the key”. Figure 4c: designers requested a sacred yellow textile object bearing a seal associated with the field records at the Sakya Temple.



Figure 5: Participant observation during the Mount Kailash journeys. The designers walked with local people and reflected on mutual assistance during physically demanding, high-altitude travel.

Discussion

The findings suggest that we understand the *Guizang* project-based design as a culturally intensive design process embedded within professional fashion practice. In relation to the research questions, its significance lies not only in the transformation of CI into contemporary fashion outcomes, but also in how such transformation was grounded in field-based cultural experience. Rather than beginning primarily with isolated visual aspects, the designers encountered cultural meanings through places, materials, practices, embodied experiences, and interactions in the local. CI emerged within cultural contexts before being translated into fashion design. This orientation is consistent with ethnographic approaches that emphasise the development of situated understandings through engagement with particular cultural and social contexts (Merzali & Hamarat, 2022; Pink et al., 2022). Vanni and Crosby (2023) similarly argue that place-based design research should understand place through interconnected relationships among people, practices, processes, environments, and meanings, not only treating location as a neutral background. In *Guizang*, cultural knowledge likewise emerged through designers’ encounters with culturally situated environments and practices rather than through decontextualised representations of cultural heritage. The present study presents how we can ground the interpretation in field-based ethnographic research and professional fashion practice. From this, culturally intensive design is not simply a cognitive process through which designers reinterpret cultural elements. Rather, it is a situated process through which cultural meanings are encountered and contextualised.

Regarding RQ1, the findings show that CI was transformed into contemporary fashion design across interconnected cultural levels. This three-level structure is consistent with our previous metaphorical-mapping research, which distinguished tangible characteristics from practical, experiential, symbolic, value-related, and philosophical dimensions (Authors et al., 2025; Author, 2025). At present, an important development is that the three levels are not used solely as categories for classifying completed design outcomes. Instead, this provided an interpretive framework for tracing how cultural knowledge moved from field encounter to fashion design. This distinction is important because our previous field-based research

found that many product-design concepts remained concentrated at visible and tangible cultural levels, with fewer concepts developing toward behavioural or philosophical interpretations. The *Guizang* findings support the proposition that deeper cultural transformation becomes possible when designers move beyond the direct reproduction of visible characteristics and establish relationships among different cultural levels. Professional fashion practice provided additional means by which such relationships could be materialised, including garment structure, textiles, construction techniques, and other aspects. The square-circle design illustrates this interpretive transformation. The geometric relationship was initially encountered through architectural and spatial aspects during field research and subsequently interpreted in relation to *fangyuan* and *tianyuan difang* (天圆地方). It was then transformed through garment structure and fashion expression. The design, therefore, did not simply reproduce a square-circle visual motif. Instead, geometry functioned as an initial perceptual reference through which broader cultural associations were progressively interpreted in culturally contextualised expressions. Consequently, metaphorical mapping served as a translational bridge between situated cultural knowledge and contemporary fashion expression. Previously, the three-level framework was primarily used to identify how cultural characteristics were reflected in product design concepts. In the present, it additionally provides a means of tracing the interpretive route from field encounter to fashion outcome. More explicitly, the framework facilitates the transformation of CI by demonstrating how tangible cultural features can be structured to create an authentic cultural experience during the design process. This interpretation is consistent with situated approaches to design research, which emphasise that knowledge emerges through relationships among people, environments, practices, and researchers' or designers' positions within the field (Vanni & Crosby, 2023; Öz & Timur, 2023).

Regarding RQ2, the findings indicate that field-based cultural immersion enhanced designers' cultural interpretation by progressively familiarising them with cultural contexts during the process. This was described as contextual familiarisation: the progressive development of cultural understanding through which designers become familiar with relevant cultural contexts. In *Guizang*, contextual familiarisation developed through five interrelated dimensions: material, through encounters with colours, forms, materials, textiles, murals, and architecture; craft-making, through observing material preparation, restoration, and craft processes; embodied, through bodily participation, movement, effort, mutual assistance, and interaction; ritual-symbolic, through engagement with practices and objects associated with blessing and symbolic meanings; and spatial, through encounters with temples, routes, architecture, and landscapes. Together, these suggest that CI in *Guizang* cannot be understood simply as a collection of cultural elements obtained during fieldwork. Instead, CI emerged as a layered body of situated cultural knowledge. This finding supports ethnographic design research, presenting that cultural understanding develops through close engagement with specific contexts (Merzali & Hamarat, 2022; Pink et al., 2022), while also reflecting place-based perspectives (Vanni & Crosby, 2023).

The findings further suggest that participatory engagement can support contextual familiarisation. Contemporary design research emphasises that participation should not be treated as a single or uniform methodological condition. Forms and degrees of participation vary according to project aims, participant roles, research activities, and the kinds of knowledge being generated (van Oorschot et al., 2022). Hodson et al. (2023) similarly show that participants may make important contributions at different stages of a design process even when professional designers retain responsibility for final design decisions. This distinction is important for positioning the *Guizang* study. Local guides, craftspeople, and other people encountered during fieldwork contributed explanations, cultural practices, and situated experience that informed designers' cultural interpretations. For example, during demanding field-based journeys, professional guides contributed route knowledge, practical organisation, safety support, and contextual understanding of culturally significant activities. Moreover, through their situated experiences in Xizang, the designers came to appreciate a way of life characterised by stepping away from hurried pursuits, maintaining a more relaxed state of mind, becoming more attentive to the present moment, and developing greater awareness of natural change and of life's impermanence. These embodied and situated experiences

differed markedly from urban life in Kunming and could be difficult to understand without physical experience in Xizang. Local roles were therefore not equivalent to those of professional fashion designers, but their participation contributed to the cultural contexts in which designers encountered and interpreted CI. This represents an important shift from collecting cultural references toward interpreting cultural relationships. Cultural participants were not simply treated as sources from whom information could be extracted. Their knowledge and practices formed part of the contextual conditions through which designers became familiar with the relationships in the field. This perspective aligns with our previous study, which described fieldwork in COPD as enabling designers to encounter people as cultural actors situated within broader sociocultural systems rather than merely as users or sources of design data (Author, 2025). At the same time, participatory engagement does not mean that the resulting garments directly represent the perspectives of local communities. Öz and Timur (2023) emphasise that locally situated research requires reflexive attention to positionality, field relationships, power, and different ways of knowing. In *Guizang*, professional designers interpreted the situated cultural knowledge encountered during fieldwork through their own disciplinary expertise, aesthetic, fashion language, material knowledge, and design practices. The resulting fashion outcomes should therefore be understood as professionally mediated interpretations developed through cultural engagement. Collaboration among researchers, fashion designers, and local people further supported this design process.

The study has several limitations. Although the project-based research progressed from field-based engagement to completed garments and public presentation, the interpretation of cultural sensitivity relied primarily on field observations, designers' interpretations and design practice. More sustained engagement with local cultural knowledge holders would provide stronger opportunities to examine and validate interpretations of cultural meanings throughout the process. The present study should therefore not be taken to suggest that short-term field immersion alone is sufficient for culturally sensitive fashion design. Future research could involve more sustained and reciprocal participation by local cultural holders, as well as more craftspeople, cultural institutions, designers, and consumers across different stages of design development. It could also examine how cultural interpretations evolve through collaboration and how different cultural holders interpret the resulting fashion outcomes. Applying the framework method to longer-term cultural innovation, branding, and fashion-development projects may further clarify how contextual familiarisation and framework analyses operate over time and across different professional practices.

Conclusion

The present study of *Guizang* extends our earlier research on COPD by conceptualising culturally intensive design as a more situated, participatory, and contextually grounded approach to cultural interpretation and design. Whereas the previous field-based studies primarily examined how cultural inspiration (CI) could be identified, metaphorically mapped, and transformed across various cultural levels into design outcomes, the present study shows that such transformation is also grounded in encounters with situated cultural experience. In this sense, culturally intensive design represents a more specific development within COPD, emphasising not only what cultural meanings are transformed but also how designers progressively develop the contextual understanding required for such transformation. The findings show that CI was transformed across the interconnected three cultural levels with the cultural analysis; therefore, the framework served not only to identify relationships between cultural characteristics and garment designs, as in our previous studies, but also to structure the interpretive process through which situated cultural knowledge moved from field encounter to contemporary fashion design outcome. Field-based cultural immersion further supported this transformation through contextual familiarisation. Designers progressively became familiar with cultural contexts through five aspects of material, craft-making, embodied, ritual-symbolic, and spatial forms. These encounters enabled the visible cultural characteristics to be understood in relation to the sociocultural contexts. The resulting garments should nevertheless be understood as professionally mediated interpretations of cultural knowledge, informed by participatory engagement, rather than direct

representations of local cultural meanings. Conceptually, the study positions culturally intensive fashion design as situated, participatory, and transformative. While COPD provides the broader framework for connecting tangible cultural characteristics with intangible meanings, culturally intensive design places greater emphasis on the field-based and contextual processes through which these meanings are gained. Within this process, *Guizang* demonstrates how ethnographic research, contextual familiarisation and interpretation, garment design and production, and cultural narration can remain interconnected within a design-based research. In practice, the study offers a framework that helps fashion designers move from visible cultural features to deeper meanings. For fashion design teams, the *Guizang* process demonstrates how field-based research and fashion design practice have been integrated into culturally grounded design development. For local cultural knowledge holders and organisations, it highlights how participation, dialogue, and situated interpretation can facilitate connections with relevant heritage cultures. Overall, *Guizang* contributes a field-based, culturally contextualised understanding of culturally intensive fashion design by organising multiple aspects of contemporary fashion design. It therefore offers a methodological framework for developing culturally contextualised, heritage-based approaches in fashion design.

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