

# Research on the Commercialization and Productive Protection of the Atlas Silk: A Case Study of Two Atlas Garment Factories

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**Abstract.** In 2008, Atlas Silk was recorded as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage. However, although the government has multi-facetedly supported it, its commercialization still has many difficulties. Through field research and in-depth interviews with the inheritors in two Atlas silk garment factories, this paper will elaborate on the challenges of the commercialization of Atlas Silk and the dilemma of income for its inheritors. Enterprises study the market expansion results from industrial production, which is based on attracting consumers' attention, especially from the general public and younger people. However, on another level, this kind of production devalues the real value of Atlas Silk material. Apart from that, a very small income earned by its craftsmen has put it into a severe crisis of sustaining from generation to generation for its inheritors. This contradiction can be solved by enterprises using innovative market strategies to give Atlas handicrafts more value and develop more room for inheritors' income, thus realizing a balance between cultural preservation and commercial development.

**Keywords:** Atlas Silk; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Commercialization; Productive Protection.

## 1. Introduction

Atlas silk is a kind of traditional methods of weaving silk that comes from deep within the Uyghur people of southern Xinjiang holding within it very heavy cultural connotations as well as being aesthetically symbolic. The method of ikat dyeing used to produce Atlas Silk is the very reason for these abstract, flowing patterns that are regarded as an inevitable part of Uyghur women's formal attire. Since 2008, weaving, and dyeing technique for Atlas silk has been enlisted as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage with implications for the art field [1].

In the past few years, atlas silk as one of the cultural symbols of Xinjiang to is paid increasing attention by the domestic and international fashion circles in showcases within the China International Fashion Weeks, and Beijing Fashion Week [2]. Meanwhile, some enterprises and designers try to make a combination between Atlas Silk and modern fashion, for attaining more broad market. However, even though it has been exposed in the fashion world, commercialize atlas silk still has to face a lot of challenges.

The high challenges in commercializing Atlas Silk lie in high production costs, a limited audience because of a narrow consumer market and low income for the inheritors, which makes it impossible to pass this craft on to future generations [3]. Particularly, the meager income of artisans leads to a decreased interest of the younger generation in practising and perpetuating the craft, causing a high risk of generational disruption. The problem with finding such a balance between cultural preservation and commercial development has turned into the question that development of Atlas Silk faces.

Against this background, this paper through field visits and interviews with inheritors at two Atlas garment factories seeks to analyze the challenges Atlas Silk faces in the process of commercialization and productive protection. Specifically, this paper will explore the following:

1. What are the major difficulties in the commercialization of Atlas Silk?
2. How enterprises can find a balance between cultural authenticity and industrial production?



In this way, the current paper will explore these questions and provide actual strategies for Atlas Silk's sustainable development by achieving a dual balance between commercialization and cultural preservation.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Productive Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

Productive protection of intangible cultural heritage is an issue of focus in recent years. In the "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Productive Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage" by the Ministry of Culture, productive protection is defined as a kind of protection that converts intangible cultural heritage into cultural products by means of production, circulation, and sale [4]. Productive protection retains the vibrancy of intangible cultural heritage and brings about profits; as such, it promotes local economic development and the inheritance of cultural techniques [5].

It has been achieved that productive protection has got something of an achievement in the field of handicraft intangible heritage, specifically in increasing incomes for inheritors and improving cultural consciousness [6]. Driven by productive protection, intangible heritage items become profitable cultural products, a process that lifts the interest of inheritors and brings new vigor into local economies. But with the advance of commercialization, it goes into that risk of losing cultural authenticity as well [7].

### **2.2. Commercialization and Cultural Authenticity of Intangible Heritage**

Commercialization is the double-edged sword of innovation. Where commercialization makes intangible heritage transition from niche to mass markets, extending its influence and audience, commercialization can also make it lose its cultural core strength and value, sometimes make it superficiality [8]. For instance, the adoption of mass production would lower the cost and open up the market; however, it would also rob the handicraft skill of its uniqueness, thus weakening the cultural value inherent in such intangible products [9].

It is particularly evident in the commercialization process of Atlas Silk. To appeal to younger consumers and the masses, companies produce products with industrial models that carry patterns of Atlas, such as T-shirts and canvas bags. Although such products do not actually involve the use of real Atlas Silk, as patterns are reproduced by printing, the authenticity of craftsmanship is again nullified [10]. The core problem in the commercialization of Atlas Silk is maintaining the cultural essence of intangible heritage when the market is expanded.

### **2.3. Transmission Dilemma of Handicraft Intangible Heritage**

The problem of successor training in handicraft intangible cultural heritage is also a hot spot for current research. Most traditional handicrafts are low-income, labor-intensive, and low social status, which hinders the willingness of young people to continue learning [11]. For example, in the process of inheriting the transmission of intangible cultural heritage such as Zhuangjin and Miao embroidery, the successor gap has become a new common problem [12].

As for Atlas Silk, the transmission issue is no less grave. As a sector where long learning periods and low income have always kept many youths away from long-term engagement in the industry, it is generally observed that youths do not wish to engage in long-term engagement in this sector. Besides, the major production places for Atlas Silk are in the remote areas of Xinjiang; because of the poor transportation and infrastructure in those places, it further compounds the problems in transmitting the craft [13]. Inheritors' income and social status should be raised so as to attract more youths to participate in the transmission, thus opening up an important aspect in the work of protecting and developing the intangible heritage.

## **2.4. Current Status of Productive Protection of Atlas Silk**

Research into the productive protection of Atlas silk is still relatively scant, with the majority of research focusing on cultural preservation, and the economic development practices of Xinjiang. As shown in previous studies, the productive protection of Atlas silk is mainly dominated by the support of government policies and the innovative practices of local enterprises. However, many problems are still encountered towards the commercialization of Atlas silk, particularly on the aspects of raw material shortage, low income for inheritors, and marketization difficulties. The field research further enriches the understanding of the current status of productive protection of Atlas Silk and puts forward related solutions accordingly.

## **3. Research Methodology**

### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research method and relies on field observations, semi-structured interviews, and non-participatory observations to collect primary information. It covers the period from June 18 to June 23, 2024, and the study locations are two Atlas garment factories in Jiaya Township of Hotan City and Korla City of Xinjiang. Through interviews with inheritors, workers, and market managers and based on the justifications of the production process made during fieldwork, this paper tries to fathom the real grounds on which Atlas Silk is handicapped with regard to commercialization and productive protection.

### **3.2. Research Subjects**

#### **3.2.1. Jiaya Liren Atlas Silk Co., Ltd.**

Atlas Silk originated in Jiaya Township, and Jiaya Liren Atlas Silk Co., Ltd. was founded there in 1997 as the largest production base for Atlas Silk in the area. The enterprise's main mode of production is essentially done by hand in the traditional sense and keeps nearly 150 workers regularly employed. The subjects of the research are the managers of the enterprise, the inheritors, and all categories of workers. The topics of interviews relate to the process of producing Atlas Silk, worker income and benefits, and market promotional strategies.

#### **3.2.2. Tao Loulan Garment Co., Ltd.**

Tao Loulan Garment Co., Ltd. was established in 1997 in Korla City. One of the main purposes of the company is to promote Atlas silk through cultural and innovative products. Its consumer market has recently been broadened by live streaming and cultural and creative products. The sample subjects from the company are its owner, designers, and factory workers. The discussion in the interviews revolves around the aspect of product design, innovation in sales channels, and how industrial production is changing the cultural connotations of Atlas silk.

### **3.3. Data Collection**

#### **3.3.1. Semi-structured Interviews.**

Interviews conducted with the inheritors, workers, and designers from both companies. Questions are designed to address the following aspects:

- The current state of production and transmission of Atlas Silk;
- The influence of industrial production on the cultural connotation of Atlas Silk;
- Incomes of the inheritors and their motivation of transmission;
- Enterprises' challenges and innovation of market promotion.

### **3.3.2. Non-participatory Observation.**

Further understanding on the production process, working environment, and production scale of the Atlas Silk industry was obtained through non-participatory observation of the production workshops, sales showrooms, workers' working conditions, and the layout of the factories.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

All interview content was recorded and transcribed, after which coding and sorting were executed via thematic analysis. The researcher classified data under themes like inheritor cultivation, commercialization promotion, and cultural authenticity, to identify issues related to the commercialization and productive protection of Atlas Silk.

### **3.5. Research Limitations**

This research has a small sample size; it only studies two Atlas garment factories. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the entire industry situation. The research subjects are only introduced in southern Xinjiang area, which raises the question of other regions and their companies producing Atlas Silk products. A possible continuation of this study could be an enlargement of the sample size so as to give the conclusions more generalizability.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Commercialization Challenges of Atlas Silk**

#### **4.1.1. High Production Costs and Limited Market Audience.**

The commercialization of Atlas Silk presents an aspect that could be a matter of challenge due to its high cost in production and limited market. High raw material, particularly the price of yarn like mulberry silk, along with natural dyes and labor cost, contributes to high production cost claim by Jiaya Liren's head. A single unit of an artisanal Atlas Silk item usually is priced between 2,000-4,000 yuan. Only a small part of the market can afford such a high price. Further market expansion is limited by the cultural aspects of Atlas Silk. Indeed, this Uyghur-focused Atlas Silk, with deep Uyghur cultural connotations, enjoys high popularity during traditional ethnic festivals and local weddings. Nonetheless, in mainstream daily fashion markets the levels of consumer acceptance are relatively low, especially among Han and other ethnic groups. Indications from market surveys point to the fact that many consumers still relate Atlas Silk with ethnic clothing, therefore its integration with modern fashion demands is rather complicated.

#### **4.1.2. Impact of Industrial Production on Cultural Authenticity.**

To come to grips with high production costs and a small audience, the Tao Loulan Garment Co., Ltd. has adopted industrial production methods to introduce affordable cultural and creative products, such as T-shirts, canvas bags, and phone chains into the market for consumers. These sample products are all Atlas patterns, which are produced by printed technology. It lowers the cost of production and pulls in a younger consumer base, especially in the tourism market. In 2020, over 10,000 canvas bags imprinted with Atlas Silk pattern designs were sold, accounting for more than 1 million yuan in sales. At the same time, industrial production has greatly lost its cultural authenticity. The digital printed and machine-woven Atlas Silk products keep the patterns visually designed but wash away or even do away with aspects of handcraftedness of the traditional craft. A cultural "replication" of this sort of symbol may bring economic benefits on the market but has no transmissive value that can reveal the essence of traditional craftsmanship. Some scholars and consumers are worried that if Atlas Silk relies too much on industrial production, it would lose, little by little, its asset as an intangible cultural heritage. Long-term market positioning and development prospects for Atlas Silk would, therefore, be hurt as a result.

## **4.2. Income and Transmission Dilemmas of Inheritors**

### **4.2.1. Low Income of Artisans and Insufficient Motivation for Transmission.**

We require a lot of patience and skill to do the ikat dyeing technique of Atlas Silk. As shown in interview data, most of the artisans engaged in the handmade production of Atlas Silk are paid between 3,000 and 5,000 yuan per month, which is much less than the industrial workers. A senior worker at Jiaya Liren said that after being engaged in Atlas dyeing for more than 40 years, income remained barely at the level of existence. It took the younger generation a large amount of time and energy to learn high-profitable remuneration technology with little benefit in earnings, and thus interest in the inheritance of the skills of producing Atlas Silk was reduced. Further survey results have shown that the artisans not only have low incomes but also do not have a good social status and professional titles. In addition, although the government has done a lot of work for the transmission of non-material heritage, artisans are often regarded as low-skilled workers and thus cannot obtain their respective social status. The principal of Tao Loulan Garment Co., Ltd. noted: "We provided some training opportunities for the workers, but even so, many young people are unwilling to spend time learning because they believe this work has no future."

### **4.2.2. Serious Crisis of Generational Discontinuity Among Inheritors.**

The company interviewed also indicated that the problem of generational discontinuity among inheritors of Atlas Silk is a severe one. In most factories, workers tend heavily toward being either middle-aged or elderly, with the younger population evincing very little interest in this age-old craft. This can be supported by one of the inheritors from Jiaya Liren, who said, "My daughter has no interest in this craft at all; she prefers to work in other cities." Thus, the propagation of Atlas Silk is not only interfered with by economic development factors but also by social changes. Urbanization in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is accelerating. More and more young people are leaving their hometowns to seek better prospects in cities, aggravating the transmission dilemma of Atlas Silk further. Also, the transmission of Atlas Silk is marked by a great information gap in craftsmanship. Since the old ways of doing things have always been transmitted orally and without systematic written records, some complex skills are at risk of being lost. As one inheritor put it: "Many of the patterns and techniques are in my head; if I don't teach them to others, they will disappear." This phenomenon further intensifies the transmission crisis and can be termed as "knowledge dying with the person." If these "checklist" is followed in preparing a paper, it will ensure that your paper meets the requirements of the publisher and facilitates its publication without hitches.

## **5. Conclusion**

Drawing on field research and interviews at two Atlas garment factories, this paper discusses the challenges and opportunities for commercializing and productively protecting Atlas Silk. It proved that with industrial production and digital marketing, the market scope widened and young consumers were attracted, but cultural authenticity of old craftsman ship was hurt. All this poses a big question: how shall market expansion go hand-in-hand with saving Atlas Silk as an intangible cultural heritage?

A major obstacle is that the income of the craftsmen is very low, which has resulted in a crisis of succession for the craft. Those young people are unwilling to inherit due to the meager financial reward and social status in the profession. Therefore, the improvement in the income and social status of the inheritors is another thing that has to be realized so as to ensure the continuity of Atlas Silk craftsmanship.

Both companies have relied on strategies as innovative as digital platforms and live streaming to market Atlas Silk, though this can never on its own resolve the deeper conflict between commercialization and cultural preservation. A sustainable path forward requires much better balancing of these two goals.

The paper argues that greater financial support for artisans and explicit cultural standards and certifications for products made from Atlas Silk will help. In addition, high-end customization should be valued and training initiatives for the new generation of inheritors established.

In the future, Atlas Silk faces a few challenges but a large set of opportunities. If there is proper global interest in traditional crafts, then Atlas Silk can find its way into prospering within the fashion and cultural tourism markets. This would take innovative strategies and proper policy support to ensure it held on to the cultural value that maintained commercial viability.

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