Lanjiaxie Reimagined: A Design Education Project and Framework to Foster Rural Cultural Entrepreneurship

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Abstract. This paper presents a practice-based design education project that protects, innovates, and popularizes *lanjiaxie*, a traditional Chinese craft using indigo dye and carved wooden blocks to create decorative fabrics known for their intricate blue and white patterns. Conducted at an international university in Wenzhou (Zhejiang, China), the project challenged a group of students to design original products using *lanjiaxie* as their primary source of inspiration, innovating with alternative and contemporary colors, shapes, forms, scales, materials, production techniques, applications, and meanings. Their learning experience included connecting with a well-known master artisan, developing a concept, and prototyping it by hand or collaborating with local factories. Besides its educational scope, the initiative aims to facilitate the sustainable development of rural areas by engaging students with artisans, exploring commercialization strategies, and proposing new product ideas that craft-based micro-enterprises can adopt. The outcomes demonstrate how design education can empower young creatives to develop business-relevant solutions that preserve and evolve intangible cultural heritage. The manuscript addresses design educators and students considering experimenting with indigo dyeing, local community leaders, and small entrepreneurs, by proposing a set of actionable guidelines and a design framework for cultural entrepreneurship rooted in innovation, education, craftsmanship, and industrial production.

Keywords: Indigo Dye, Lanjiaxie, Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage, Product Design Education, Rural Entrepreneurship.

1 Introduction

This paper presents the background, process, outcomes, and reflections of a practice-based research project that explores the relationship between traditional craft techniques and contemporary design, intending to foster rural cultural entrepreneurship. Specifically, it investigates new frontiers in the protection, evolution, and popularization of *lanjiaxie*, a traditional Chinese textile dyeing technique characterized by intricate blue and white indigo patterns.

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The advent of modern synthetic dyes and the rise of automated manufacturing processes have led to a significant decline in the practice of *lanjiaxie*. Handmade products, using natural pigments, were quickly replaced by cheap semi-industrial ones, affecting the family economy of those who had long relied on this craft as a primary livelihood [1–2]. But "while it was believed that the *lanjiaxie* technique had become extinct, it was rediscovered in the 1970s […] in the areas of Yueqing, Cangnan, and Rui'an" [3].

Although still visually appealing to younger generations, *lanjiaxie* has lost much of its original cultural significance and symbolic value. In response to the risk of its disappearance, the Chinese Central Government has taken steps to protect this heritage by including *lanjiaxie* in the third batch of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2011 [4].

The research was conducted over one academic semester. It involved two faculty members of the Wenzhou-Kean University, Michael Graves College of Architecture and Design, guiding a cohort of undergraduate students enrolled in the Industrial Design Studio 2 course. While grounded in the local Chinese context, the project maintains an intrinsically international character because indigo dyeing is a globally recognized practice, albeit with territorial variations, and due to the diverse cultural and national backgrounds of the instructors and students involved. This manuscript seeks to address the following research questions:

- How can traditional intangible cultural heritage practices like *lanjiaxie* be reinterpreted through contemporary design methods to appeal to younger generations?
- What role does practice-based learning in design education play in fostering students' critical thinking, cultural awareness, and entrepreneurial sensitivity toward rural communities?
- In what ways does the combination of indigo dyeing and modern product enable sustainable rural revitalization?

This project investigated how intersecting traditional crafts and design can inspire innovative approaches, as articulated by Sennett [5] and Lees-Maffei and Houze [6], and ultimately catalyze rural entrepreneurship and economic regeneration. The academic contribution of this study lies in the derivation of practical guidelines and a theoretical design framework for cultural entrepreneurship, which may serve as a reference for other design researchers and students in educational settings, practitioners in their professional activities, as well as for community leaders, small entrepreneurs, and craftspeople.

1.1 Indigo Dyeing and the Lanjiaxie Tradition in Wenzhou

Indigo dyeing is found in multiple cultures. China, India, the Middle East, and other Asian countries were some of the first to use this sustainable craft to dye fabrics. Because of its allure, indigo became a sought-after export, finding its way through the Silk Road to the Roman Empire and beyond [7]. Natural indigo is obtained by many plants: *Indigofera tinctoria*, *Polygonum tinctorium*, and *Isatis Indigotica* are just some of them [8]. The dye is obtained by soaking and fermenting the leaves, and the harvest

typically happens twice a year. After several days of fermentation, the pungent smell of the mixture, its foaming surface, and the color change from brown to vivid blue, indicate that the sediment is ready to be poured into buckets and glass jars for storage or used for dyeing directly [9].

Early textile artisans used many methods to dye fabrics, such as the clamping-resist method, which consists of pressing layers of cloth between carved matrices to produce complex designs. The overall process is illustrated in Figure 1.

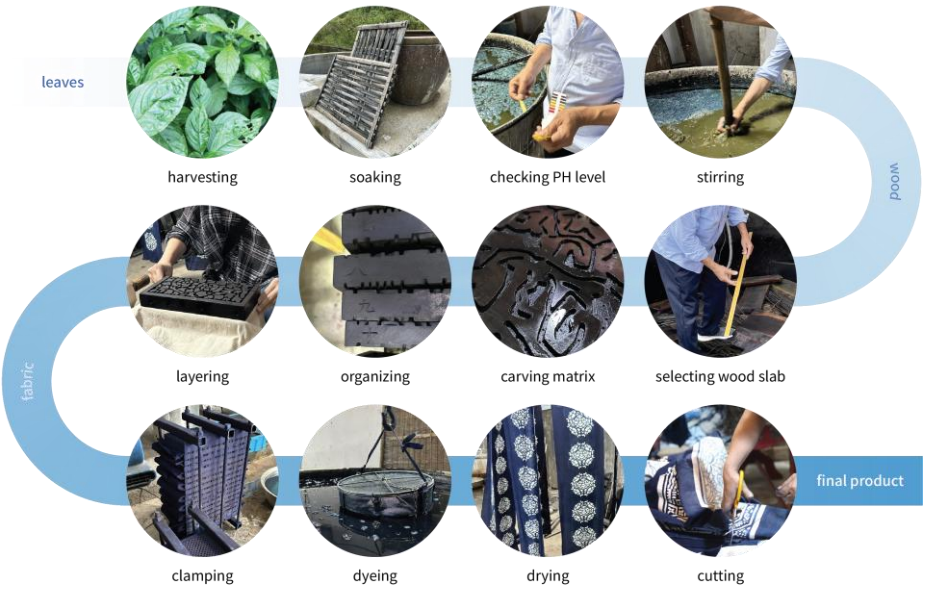

Fig. 1. The process for producing indigo-dyed fabrics, from leaf harvesting to the finished product. The figure illustrates the method employed in Wenzhou, which resembles processes used in other geographical areas.

In the Wenzhou region, this heritage crystallized into the *lanjiaxie* technique, whose name derives from *lanzhi*, meaning 'blue weaving,' and *jiaxie*, a method combining resist dyeing and block printing on fabric. This practice dates back more than 3000 years [10–11].

Historically, *lanjiaxie* products were highly valued because of the labor-intensive, artisanal process required for their creation. These items were held onto and passed down through generations. For instance, indigo-dyed quilts were included in wedding dowries, symbolizing protection and continuity of the family heritage. Typical motifs found in these textiles were families with children, floral patterns, animals, and characters from the Ou opera (a regional form of Chinese opera) [12–13].

In recent years in China, traditional indigo dyeing for sustainable fashion has been experiencing renewed interest [14]. The *Rui'an Lanjiaxie Museum* in *Jinshuicun village*, the *Dongli Minyi Museum* in Dongyuan village, and the *Qidu Chaicangli Indigo*

Studio on Qidu Island are just some of the Wenzhounese organizations becoming involved in the promotion and education of the public about indigo, and they are also coming up with all-new forms of selling these items. With their expertise, they have produced both traditional and contemporary interpretations of this historic craft (see Fig. 2).

To show continued cultural resonance, many multinational companies use *lanjiaxie* in their marketing activities. In October 2023, for example, Apple utilized a temporary *lanjiaxie* fabric mural to cover the entrance of its newly opened store in Wenzhou [15]. Despite this resurgence, it is now more critical than ever to initiate projects aimed at protecting and evolving the *lanjiaxie* technique, also as an economic practice.

Fig. 2. *Lanjiaxie* in Wenzhou. From left: classic patterns alongside hand-carved wooden printing blocks; textiles prepared for commercial distribution; chromatic experiments; contemporary interpretations of everyday items such as hats, bags, and other accessories.

2 Educational Outline

Industrial Design Studio 2 is an intermediate-level capstone course for junior industrial design students. In recent years, the course has served as a laboratory for experimentation at the intersection between regional cultural heritage and global design practices. It has also functioned as a platform for collaborative engagement with industry and artisans [16].

The development of the Industrial Design Studio 2 curriculum began with preparatory research visits to rural villages in June 2024. Through these site visits, the main project brief was outlined, ensuring that the pedagogical objectives of the course aligned with the course's contextual framework.

The course was organized around a single design project entitled *Lanjiaxie Reimagined*, extending across the entire 2024 Fall semester. Two sections of students, totaling 21 participants, were instructed by Lisa Perrine Brown (Section 1) and Maurizio Vrenna (Section 2). While both instructors followed a shared curriculum and held some joint classes, they adapted teaching materials to suit their pedagogical styles. An overview of the course structure is provided in Figure 3.

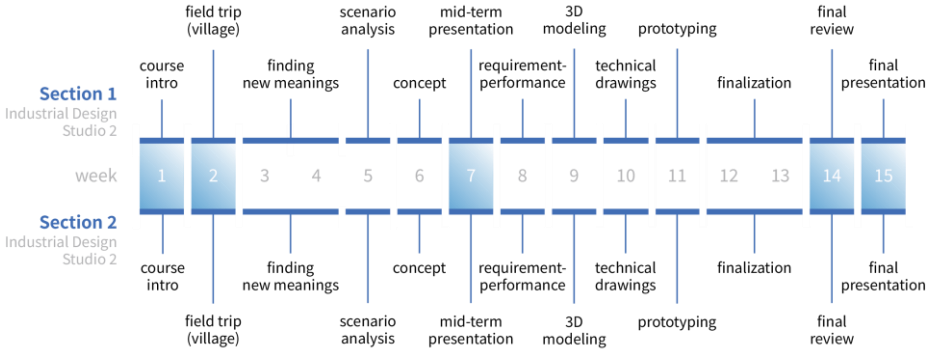

Fig. 3. Industrial Design Studio 2: 15-week schedule. On five occasions, joint classes were combined between sections. These are indicated in a light blue shade.

2.1 Lanjiaxie Reimagined

The *Lanjiaxie Reimagined* project challenged students to engage with *lanjiaxie*, envisioning how their designs could inspire new product lines for rural artisans or small studios interested in expanding their offerings. Using *lanjiaxie* as the primary source of inspiration, the project fostered experimentation across multiple dimensions: introducing new patterns, colors, materials, and both two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms; adapting the traditional aesthetic to different scales and applications; and employing alternative production techniques to address contemporary needs.

2.2 Field Trip to Jinshuicun Village

As part of the experiential learning component of the course, a field trip was organized to the *Rui'an Lanjiaxie Museum*, in the small village of *Jinshuicun*, approximately one hour away from downtown Wenzhou (see Fig. 4). The museum preserves artifacts and documents the evolution of the *lanjiaxie* craft. It is also an operating workshop where the traditional processes are still being carried out. Students were able to observe and participate in a few stages of the *lanjiaxie* production, seeing how labor-intensive it is.

The highlight of the visit was a guided session with Wang Hesheng, a master artisan who has played an essential role in the revival of this craft. His narrative described the challenges he faced in tracking down the last elders in remote mountain villages who retained the original knowledge of *lanjiaxie*. His dedication to learning directly from these sources and restoring the authenticity of the practice deeply resonated with the students.

Fig. 4. Field trip to Rui'an Lanjiaxie Museum, Jinshuicun village, Wenzhou. 9 September 2024.

2.3 Concepts and New Meanings

Upon returning to campus, the students actively engaged in developing their projects and were encouraged to define their design directions autonomously. Over two weeks, they developed design concepts through scenario analyses to identify novel product typologies and corresponding target user groups.

They were supported by supplementary lectures on the global history of indigo and contemporary design applications, and reinterpreted the *lanjiaxie* visual language in diverse ways, frequently uncovering new layers of meaning. Through exploratory sketching and the construction of low-fidelity prototypes, two-dimensional patterns were transformed into three-dimensional forms.

2.4 From Requirements to Performances

Students moved from exploration to resolution in the second half of the semester. As a result of receiving feedback on their concept designs, they began developing their products. This required assessing feasibility, practicability, and functionality. A requirement-performance analysis helped translate user needs into technical features, supporting objective design decisions. The process was informed by the design theories of Ciribini [17].

2.5 Prototypes with Market Potential

While some prototypes were handcrafted using the university's workshop facilities, other students opted to collaborate with local factories and craftspeople, which, at relatively modest costs, assisted them in producing full-scale models. Eleven projects were developed (see Fig. 5). Their brief description is below.

- **Bunnyou:** A toy line inspired by the five Chinese elements that help children recognize and understand their emotions.
- **Wishi:** A crib-attached toy combining *lanjiaxie* imagery and interactive features to support infants' visual and motor development.
- **Lanzzle:** A toy that uses *lanjiaxie*-inspired shapes as puzzles and building blocks to encourage imagination and cultural appreciation.
- **Echo Trail:** A luggage blending colorful *lanjiaxie* motifs with pagoda-inspired design, symbolizing a reverence for cultural traditions.
- **Instafairy:** Do-it-yourself cardboard make-believe wearables featuring indigo rabbits, cats, deer, and other magic elements.
- **Blueland Dialogue:** A modern wall decoration combining *lanjiaxie* dye and UV-reactive paint to showcase the intangibility of traditional craftsmanship.
- **Xielu:** A pillow in the shape of an endangered bird to foster comfort and raise awareness of Wenzhou's ecological and cultural preservation.
- **Blue Aegis:** A woman's necklace shaped like a lotus flower. In emergencies, a concealed button allows the wearer to request immediate assistance.
- **Azure Whimsy:** A modern table centerpiece and game with built-in storage compartments. It symbolizes a warm welcome into married life.
- **Little Blue Hero:** A bandage with vivid patterns and interactive features to help children transform fear into fun.
- **Lanjiaxie DIY Cover:** A do-it-yourself smartphone case. Dragons, flowers, and other stickers can be attached to the case.

Fig. 5. The eleven projects developed in the two sections of the Industrial Design Studio 2 course strongly focus on their cultural relevance and commercial potential. Pictures and renderings by the students.

2.6 Presentations with Invited Guests

The final presentations in December 2024 served as moments of critical reflection, especially on how the prototypes might be simplified or adapted for artisanal production, while keeping in mind cost constraints, market appeal, and viable business models (see Fig. 6). To validate the projects further, Federico Castigliano, professor at Istituto Marangoni Shanghai and an expert in cultural studies, was invited to participate. Invitations were also extended to Wang Hesheng and other representatives of the Rui'an community and the local cultural office; however, they were unfortunately unable to attend.

The projects were evaluated based on several criteria such as originality and creativity, clarity and effectiveness of the visual presentation, the overall craft of the prototype, the feasibility of commercialization strategies, and their applicability.

Fig. 6. Students showcasing their prototypes to professors and external experts on the final presentation day. Wenzhou-Kean University. 12 December 2024.

2.7 Addressing the Research Questions

The *Lanjiaxie Reimagined* project offers clear evidence in relation to the three research questions guiding this study. In terms of reinterpreting traditional *lanjiaxie* for younger generations, the prototypes demonstrated that heritage can retain its essence while being adapted to modern aesthetic tastes. Notably, students showed enthusiasm for their work by proudly sharing their projects on personal social media platforms, indicating engagement with the cultural material beyond academic requirements.

Concerning the role of practice-based learning in design education, moving step by step from field experience to prototype development helped students grow in several ways. They sharpened their critical thinking through requirement-performance analysis, cultural awareness through direct immersion, and entrepreneurial sensitivity by considering market viability and production feasibility.

Lastly, addressing how indigo dyeing integration contributes to sustainable rural revitalization, the project demonstrates innovative product applications that leverage cultural assets and, through appropriate marketing and commercialization strategies, may provide alternative income streams for local communities.

3 A Design Framework for Cultural Rural Entrepreneurship

Since China entered the market economy in the 1980s, entrepreneurship has grown at a remarkable pace, becoming a key driver of the country's economic transformation [18]. Remarkably, it is estimated that rural areas alone have contributed around 10% of China's annual economic growth, highlighting how vital the countryside has been to China's development [19]. Over the past decades, tens of millions of migrants have returned to their home regions, where many have established non-agricultural businesses, giving rise to a new entrepreneurial force within rural communities. Recognizing this potential, in 2015, the Chinese State Council launched a mass entrepreneurship initiative to alleviate poverty and stimulate entrepreneurial activities in rural China [20].

Building upon this context of dynamic rural transformation and the experience with the *Lanjiaxie Reimagined* project, this paper proposes a design framework for cultural entrepreneurship (see Fig. 7) informed by previously established theoretical constructs [21–26]. This framework integrates, to a varying extent:

- Culture, intended as a complex whole encompassing knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, and the full range of capabilities and habits individuals acquire in a society [27].
- Education, the initiatives promoting learning, knowledge-sharing, and capacity building.
- Design, as both a creative process and a means of shaping ideas into tangible outcomes.
- Entrepreneurship, as the driver that enables projects to be sustained, scaled, and transformed into viable opportunities.

Within the framework, diverse projects can emerge and thrive. Some initiatives may lean predominantly toward cultural expression and educational initiatives, while others may have a strong entrepreneurial orientation. For example, culturally oriented projects may involve the development of digital archives or initiatives such as festivals. Education-led projects could include knowledge exchanges, workshops, and digital platforms for sharing local expertise. Design-focused initiatives may be pursued through co-designing with local communities, aligning practical needs with cultural identity. Entrepreneurial projects, in turn, may encompass fashion, furniture, or lifestyle collections targeting international markets, integrated tourism experiences such as experiential travel, and e-commerce platforms that expand the visibility and viability of local products.

Arguably, the entrepreneurial dimension can also be framed as a potential second phase that follows the cultural, educational, and design stages. This is evident in the case of *Lanjiaxie Reimagined*, where the educational and design components remain central, while entrepreneurship plays an essential yet secondary role.

Projects within these four domains are, by definition, multidisciplinary and subject to external influences. They inherently embody tensions between past and present times. On the one hand, they are deeply rooted in tradition, which serves as the foundation of craftsmanship and conveys the unique characteristics of a specific locality and its cultural identity. On the other hand, modernization and the constant pursuit of

improvement lead to the development of more efficient production techniques that evolve into industrial processes. These processes become standardized, detached from any specific geographical context, and reflect a cosmopolitan and international character. Given these diverse stimuli and inputs, such projects are inherently dynamic rather than static. They move along a spectrum ranging from theoretical to practical, pedagogical to entrepreneurial, and experimental to commercially driven. While they often result in tangible products, they may also take the form of services, systems, and experiences, which aligns with the World Design Organization's definition of industrial design [28].

A diverse range of actors may be involved in their development, including, but not limited to, designers, craftspeople, educators, students, cultural mediators, villagers, and representatives of local governments, alongside industry partners, anthropologists, tourism operators, sustainability experts, and marketing professionals.

While the proposed approach is best suited for rural contexts, it is also arguably applicable in urban settings that share challenges with rural areas. The open-ended nature of this framework creates space for interpretation and fosters a lively dialogue within the design community.

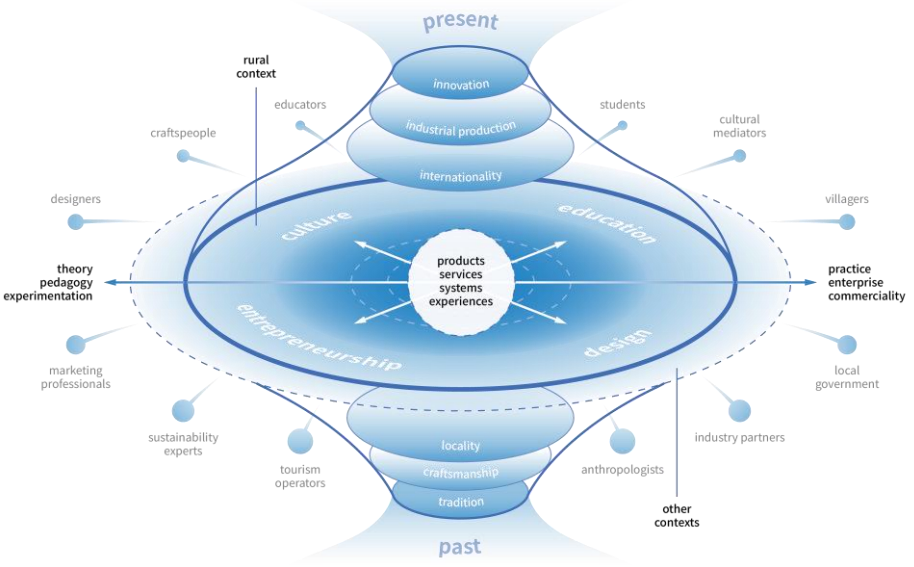

Fig. 7. Design framework for cultural rural entrepreneurship. It can also be adapted to other contexts.

4 Design Guidelines

Building on the design framework and the insights derived from the *Lanjiaxie Reimagined* project, Table 1 presents a set of actionable guidelines to support the development of craft-based micro-enterprises. These guidelines target the multiple stakeholders engaged in rural cultural entrepreneurship projects. For each one, potential challenges are identified, along with practical mitigation strategies to increase the likelihood of a successful implementation. While the guidelines are organized in a logical sequence, they are not necessarily designed to be followed in a strictly linear order.

1. **Start with co-creation:** Involve artisans early to align designs with their skills and empower them as co-creators.
2. **Translate heritage into function:** Reinterpret traditional symbols and techniques into useful, contemporary products.
3. **Embrace scalable simplicity:** Design simple, low-cost products that are easy to produce and scale.
4. **Embed storytelling in design:** Integrate authentic cultural stories to enhance product meaning and market appeal.
5. **Prototype locally, think globally:** Test products with local communities while targeting broader markets.
6. **Encourage cross-sector collaboration:** Build partnerships across education, government, and business to support artisans.
7. **Prioritize sustainable practices:** Use eco-friendly materials to create durable, respectful, sustainable products.
8. **Develop entrepreneurial skills:** Provide artisans and designers with basic business knowledge, including pricing, marketing, and financial management.
9. **Establish feedback loops with customers:** Create simple mechanisms to gather feedback after product launches, enabling continuous improvement.
10. **Protect intellectual property (IP):** Help artisans understand and secure legal rights over their designs and cultural motifs to safeguard their work.

Table 1. Design guidelines, potential problems, and mitigation strategies for craft-based micro-enterprises.

	Design guideline	Potential problems	Mitigation strategies
1.	**Start with co-creation**	Lack of trust or mutual understanding between designers and artisans; power imbalance.	Build long-term relationships through engagement; conduct trust-building workshops; involve local mediators.
2.	**Translate heritage into function**	Risk of oversimplifying or misrepresenting cultural symbols; potential accusations of cultural appropriation.	Work closely with cultural experts and local elders; ensure cultural sensitivity reviews.

3.	**Embrace scalable simplicity**	Oversimplification may compromise perceived value; artisans may see simple products as less prestigious.	Educate artisans and consumers about the value of accessible, affordable design; develop entry-level and premium product lines.
4.	**Embed storytelling in design**	Weak storytelling or superficial narratives; consumers may not perceive authenticity.	Collect authentic stories from artisans; co-develop storytelling material with local stakeholders.
5.	**Prototype locally, think globally**	Difficulty accessing wider markets; limited marketing expertise among artisans.	Develop e-commerce platforms or partnerships with urban distributors; provide training on digital marketing and online sales.
6.	**Encourage cross-sector collaboration**	Bureaucratic obstacles; difficulty coordinating between sectors (academia, government, private sector).	Create formal collaboration frameworks; assign coordination roles; seek initial pilot funding.
7.	**Prioritize sustainable practices**	Higher cost or limited availability of sustainable materials; knowledge gaps about sustainability.	Source locally available eco-friendly materials; provide technical workshops on sustainable production techniques; create partnerships with sustainability experts.
8.	**Develop entrepreneurial skills**	Artisans and designers may lack basic business knowledge.	Partner with business schools or NGOs for accessible training programs.
9.	**Establish feedback loops with customers**	Limited customer engagement mechanisms in rural areas.	Use social media surveys, pop-up exhibitions, and tourist interactions for feedback.
10.	**Protect intellectual property (IP)**	Lack of IP awareness; legal complexities.	Simplify IP education; seek pro bono legal support; involve cultural authorities.

Applicability is demonstrated by how the above guidelines were directly derived from the course development and the student prototypes. For instance, the barriers between craftspeople and designers (guideline 1) were pulled apart during the field trip to *Jinshuicun* village.

Projects such as the *Lanjiaxie DIY Cover* exemplified guideline 3, displaying evidence of how the industrial production of the smartphone case can reduce the burden on craftspeople but still allow for customization, such as the hand-drawn and sewn stickers.

The *Little Blue Hero* bandages revealed how narrative can be embedded in design (guideline 4), turning a simple healthcare product into a culturally meaningful object by which children learn about traditional culture and herbal practices through fables.

Likewise, *Echo Trail* exemplified guideline 5 by integrating local aesthetics into products with an international market appeal. After all, a suitcase is naturally suited to being transported across multiple locations, and it may serve as a vehicle for cultural promotion, sparking interest in *lanjiaxie* in broader markets.

Blue Aegis emphasized the importance of multisectoral collaboration (guideline 6), pointing to possible partnerships with electronics companies. In the same way, *Blueland Dialogue* could evolve into a collection of works suitable for private restaurants or hotels, but also for cultural centers, museums, and other public spaces in collaboration with local governments.

The use of recycled cardboard in *Instafairy* and the avoidance of plastic and glue in favor of wood and screws in other prototypes demonstrated how environmentally sustainable practices can be integrated into product development (guideline 7). The remaining guidelines result from careful reflections conducted during and after the project's conclusion.

5 Limits of the Research

Despite being able to answer the research questions, this study still has a few limitations. From a product design standpoint, the quality of some prototypes could be improved. Only a few students engaged directly with natural *lanjiaxie* fabric and the traditional clamp-resist dyeing method. This limitation might be rooted in the fact that students faced difficulties when engaging with craftspeople, and because of their basic skills when it comes to sewing. Moreover, the unique patterning and symbolic language of *lanjiaxie* textiles posed a challenge for students attempting to reinterpret these traditional motifs within contemporary design frameworks. In trying to recreate lanjiaxie graphics, many of the subtle details and cultural nuances were lost. Lastly, specific product names were not fully representative or aligned with their intended narratives. All these shortcomings suggest the need for further refinement in both the execution and branding phases.

From an educational perspective, while industrial design professors were the ones who ran the course, it would have been instrumental to get input from visual communication or graphic design faculty, particularly in the areas of packaging and promotional material. Moreover, the project would have greatly benefited from integrated courses with business professionals on bringing products to market effectively. Regrettably, this interdisciplinary collaboration proved challenging due to rigid curriculum structures and scheduling limitations.

Additionally, there is also potential for better interaction among students, faculty, and the local community. Foremost, it was unfortunate that the products could not be presented to the village representatives in person, but only during an online session. Furthermore, rather than proposing externally developed, top-down design solutions to master artisans, future iterations should adopt a bottom-up, community-based approach. This might be done with co-design workshops and other participatory forms of engagement, in ways that encourage mutual learning.

Regarding entrepreneurial outcomes, the project remains a compelling academic experiment that has produced valuable theoretical insights and gathered the interest of local authorities. However, it has not yet been validated by market data or real sales performance. Only through such testing can objective evaluations be made of what the project is socially, culturally, and economically delivering.

Lastly, as the research was conducted by international faculty at a Sino-American jointly-operated university, some may raise concerns regarding potential cultural appropriation. However, as Vrenna and Cui noted, it would be more accurate to refer to this project as a meaningful example of cultural appreciation [29].

6 Reflections

Indigo traditions in countries like India, Japan, and China demonstrate both continuity and reinvention. For example, in India, block printing once served *Mughal* elites and rural communities [30], and today, brands continue to sustain this practice even as denim dominates global fashion [31]. The art of *aizome*, the Japanese indigo, has been showcased in international events, highlighting *shibori* and *sukumo* dyeing techniques [32]. In China, local craftspeople and artists are not the only ones working with indigo. Foreign designers also bring this tradition further, advocating for internationalization, slow fashion, and emphasizing ethical production [33].

While this study may be framed within a distinct Chinese background, it acknowledges that the creativity of indigo can hardly be limited to this context alone. The relevance of the study comes from the universal cross-cultural importance of indigo, thus making it a strong case for design education research [34]. The true innovation of this project lies in the attempt to incorporate the semiotics of *lanjiaxie* into contemporary products that extend beyond the domain of textiles. Through this experience, students were able to explore a culturally rich area they had little previous knowledge of. This opportunity opened up new perspectives, allowing students to reconnect with local traditions while applying design methodologies.

As China, along with many other nations, actively promotes rural revitalization and cultural preservation, educational projects such as *Lanjiaxie Reimagined* become catalysts for broader discussions about the future of sustainable craft-based economies and can help identify opportunities for economic development and poverty alleviation, particularly in tropical regions [35]. By encouraging respectful, creative engagement with traditional knowledge, universities have a role in producing a new generation of professionals who respect cultural continuity and community-based innovation.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this research has substantial relevance. As students prepare to enter the professional world, this project challenges conventional pathways and introduces alternative design futures not in large design companies but in meaningful collaborations with rural communities. Such engagement may offer personal fulfillment, especially for young designers struggling to find opportunities in highly competitive urban markets. Simultaneously, the project offers potential lifelines to craftspeople who, in many cases, have lost their clientele and struggle to preserve their livelihoods.

In July 2025, the project *Blueland Dialogue* received the Silver Prize at the *2025 FA International Frontier Innovation Design Competition* [36]. Also, all prototypes are planned to be exhibited in a nearby village to collect feedback from residents and institutions. A seminar or workshop will complement the exhibition. This mirrors similar initiatives such as *Zeya Paper Reborn* in October 2022 [37–38] and *Modern Bamboo Inlay* in March 2025 [39–40], which received positive media coverage and prompted discussions with local authorities and artisans about semi-artisanal production and commercialization of cultural products. Notably, *Zeya Paper Reborn* was also recognized in 2024 as an outstanding case in the Zhejiang Province's rural revitalization initiative by the Office of Education Department [41].

Lanjiaxie Reimagined demonstrates that heritage, when approached not as a static relic but as a dynamic and evolving platform, can lead to renewed engagement, attract new audiences, and potentially create alternative income streams for rural communities.

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