

A Study on Sustainable Development Approaches for Huizhou Paper-Cutting from the Perspective of ICH Inheritance

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Abstract: As an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Huizhou City, Huizhou paper-cutting serves as a vital medium for non-formal education, injects vitality into regional economic development, and promotes the dynamic transmission of culture. Currently, Huizhou paper-cutting faces core challenges including the aging of inheritors, generational discontinuity, difficulties in sustaining its core livelihood, insufficient policy support, and low social recognition. This study, utilizing field research (in-depth interviews with three inheritors) and questionnaire surveys (336 valid responses), proposes four key development pathways: (1) Constructing a tiered education and inheritance system to address the generational gap among inheritors; (2) Innovating cultural consumption scenarios to enhance the viability of its core practice; (3) Strengthening policy and educational support to activate internal drivers; (4) Building a "Huijian" (Huizhou Paper-cutting) digital cultural ecosystem to foster dissemination and recognition. The research findings provide theoretical and practical references for the sustainable development of similar ICH projects.

Keywords: ICH Inheritance; Huizhou Paper-cutting; Living Transmission; Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

Amid the global wave of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding, UNESCO's Convention the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage underscores the core importance of "living transmission."^[1]The 2022 Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage explicitly identifies ICH as the "living embodiment" of the continuous evolution of Chinese civilization.^[2]Huizhou paper-cutting, inscribed on the Huizhou Municipal ICH Representative List in 2013, is a distinctive folk art form in the Lingnan region (southern China) with a development history spanning over 130 years. As a vital vehicle for Huizhou's folk culture, its motifs and themes are deeply intertwined with local culture, embodying the life wisdom, beliefs, customs, and aesthetic values of its people. The protection and revitalization of Huizhou paper-cutting are thus of significant importance fostering cultural identity.

This study employs field research (in-depth interviews with three inheritors) and questionnaire surveys (336 valid responses) to systematically analyze the current state of preservation and core challenges facing Huizhou paper-cutting. It aims to explore localized development approaches within theoretical framework of ICH transmission, providing valuable insights for similar ICH projects.

2. Cultural Value and Social Functions of Huizhou Paper-cutting

2.1 Huizhou Paper-cutting as a Key Medium for Non-formal Education

Huizhou paper-cutting conveys values through symbolic metaphors, forming an implicit mechanism of "motif-meaning-edification." Its motif designs incorporate distinct cultural metaphors, translating abstract ethics into tangible visual language. For instance, the "bamboo" motif symbolizes human resilience, the "fish" embodies hopes for prosperity ("surplus year after year"), and the "double happiness" character conveys blessings for newlyweds. Some schools facilitate students' intuitive understanding of filial piety culture by creating paper-cuts depicting themes like "Lying on Ice to Catch Carp for Mother" and "Fanning the Pillow and Warming the Quilt." This "conveying values through cutting" educational model helps the younger generation understand and appreciate traditional culture, folk customs, and their underlying values.

2.2 Huizhou Paper-cutting as a Driver of Regional Cultural Industry's Economic Value

Zhang Jijiao's "Structure-Function Theory" posits that ICH forms new structures with new functions in modern society, thereby advancing the modernization of local industrial structures.^[3] As a bridge converting cultural capital into economic value, Huizhou paper-cutting injects vitality into regional development. Traditional paper-cutting, as a cultural element, holds inherent market value, readily sold as souvenirs, gifts, and decorations. Simultaneously, innovative adaptations incorporating modern elements are expanding industry boundaries. Examples include developing LED paper-cut lamps, diversifying the art form with contemporary aesthetics to attract tourists for appreciation and purchase, thereby contributing to local culture and the economy.

2.3 Huizhou Paper-cutting Promotes Living Cultural Transmission

ICH represents humanity's cultural memory, embodying the collective unconscious attributes of human society.^[4] As a "wordless local chronicle," Huizhou paper-cutting preserves cultural memory through intergenerational transmission. It is an integral part of Chinese traditional folk art, bearing rich historical culture, sound values, and unique symbolism. Younger generations rediscover cultural belonging by replicating ancestral motifs, using paper-cutting as a medium to record Huizhou's culture. This aids in preserving and transmitting local culture, folk traditions, and craftsmanship, fostering cultural continuity.

3. Core Challenges in Huizhou Paper-cutting Transmission and Attribution Analysis

3.1 Intensified Aging of Inheritors and Intergenerational Disconnect

ICH inheritors are the core of living transmission^[5], yet Huizhou paper-cutting faces the severe challenge of a "generational gap" among its practitioners. Firstly, existing inheritors are aging, with the average age of municipal-level inheritors exceeding 65. Secondly, few new learners are emerging; surveys indicate only 8.3% of respondents are willing to learn paper-cutting, predominantly retirees. Modern society's fast pace and materialism prioritize utility and efficiency over the skill and craftsmanship intrinsic to traditional handicrafts.^[6] The intergenerational rupture is further exacerbated by the high barrier to skill acquisition. The adage "a thousand cuts unbroken, a thousand perforations untangled" reflects the demanding composition and perforation techniques requiring drawing skills and significant time investment. Contemporary youth often lack the patience for such dedication. Additionally, tool adaptability issues worsen the gap: The specialized scissors used, known as "Dragon-Phoenix Scissors," differ from common ones. Their size, designed for female hands, reduces the success rate of works by male and child learners by 34% (inheritor interview records), further diminishing their willingness to persist.

3.2 Difficulty for Artisans to Sustain Paper-cutting as a Primary Livelihood

Research reveals that virtually no artisans rely solely on Huizhou paper-cutting for their livelihood. The core issue is the survival paradox of "high cost" versus "low income" faced by handmade paper-cutting in the modern market. On one hand, crafting a fine handmade piece requires significant time investment. Materials like velvet and rice paper increase costs, forcing higher selling prices. On the other hand, a disconnect between cultural value and consumer perception makes it difficult for consumers to accept these prices. Surveys show 85% believe paper-cuts should cost under 20 RMB, overlooking the skill premium. Inheritor Liu Yajing noted in an interview: "Many customers find the paper-cuts beautiful, but refuse to pay. They'd rather buy their child a lollipop than spend money on a small paper-cut." Consequently, earnings for inheritors are minimal. Questionnaire analysis indicates widespread pessimism about Huizhou paper-cutting's prospects, deeming survival through it as a primary occupation unrealistic.

3.3 Limited Support from Government and Schools

Firstly, government policy and financial support for Huizhou paper-cutting are insufficient. While the government previously organized overseas exhibitions for inheritors, these ceased after the 2020 pandemic, drastically reducing international exposure and stifling innovation, thereby diminishing its influence and creativity. As a static ICH form, its exhibition impact is less dynamic than performances

like lion dance, making it harder to secure government funding within ICH activity budgets. Secondly, despite strong rhetoric around "ICH entering campuses," few schools offer dedicated paper-cutting courses. Most are only brief elective or interest classes. This limits teachers' ability to convey ICH culture beyond basic techniques and shortens student exposure, reducing teaching effectiveness.

3.4 Low Recognition and Social Identity of Huizhou Paper-cutting

Huizhou paper-cutting faces the dual dilemma of "cultural capitalization" and "public alienation." Once embedded in daily life as local knowledge, its transformation from a practical symbol to a cultural commodity has weakened its connection with ordinary people. Field research shows a highly concentrated consumer base: 82% are high-income individuals (e.g., business owners, collectors), while purchases by ordinary families are below 5%. As functionality shifts towards ornamentation, this "elitization" detaches paper-cutting from its cultural roots—once adorning ancestral halls and shop signs, it is now confined to glass cases as "ICH specimens." Its spiritual essence (e.g., blessing, community bonding) is reduced to mere aesthetic symbols. Surveys reveal a cognitive gap: 50% of respondents had never encountered Huizhou paper-cutting, and only 23% of those aware could explain its cultural significance. Worse, low recognition and identity form a vicious cycle: meager incomes prevent inheritors from funding promotion, while weak dissemination deepens societal unawareness, trapping inheritors in a cycle of "the less known, the harder to transmit."

4. Reconstructing Development Pathways for Huizhou Paper-cutting from an ICH Revitalization Perspective

4.1 Constructing a Tiered Education and Transmission System to Address the Inheritor Gap

The government should focus on establishing a systematic training mechanism that covers all age groups and integrates school education with social education.

The first step is to foster early exposure through basic education by developing digital teaching materials on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) paper-cutting. This involves embedding "paper-cutting+" interdisciplinary projects into primary and secondary school art classes, decoding traditional patterns into visual knowledge modules. For instance, applying paper-cutting composition techniques to art, and interpreting the folk memories carried by paper-cutting patterns, thereby immersing traditional cultural awareness into the knowledge construction process of adolescents and nurturing cultural identity among the younger generation.

Next, vocational education pathways should be established by setting up specialized ICH paper-cutting transmission programs in vocational schools. A dual-mentor teaching model—pairing "inheritors + designers"—should be implemented: the former ensures the authentic transmission of traditional techniques, while the latter introduces modern design thinking. Simultaneously, courses on intellectual property management and digital marketing should be offered to cultivate versatile inheritors who not only master core skills but also possess market operation capabilities, thereby addressing the disconnect between traditional craftsmanship and modern industries.

Finally, the concept of lifelong learning should be extended to community education. In social education settings, "paper-cutting maker spaces" can be established in communities, offering programs such as therapeutic paper-cutting courses for senior citizens and creative handcraft training for homemakers. This transforms ICH transmission into a public aesthetic education initiative, allowing paper-cutting skills to break free from the closed system of master-apprentice transmission and become a cultural lifestyle that is accessible, creatable, and shareable for all.

This tiered educational network—from enlightenment education to professional training and then to public participation—restructures educational fields and lays a sustainable talent foundation for the dynamic transmission of ICH paper-cutting.

4.2 Innovating Cultural Consumption Scenarios to Enhance Livelihood Viability

Creating innovative cultural consumption scenarios is a key pathway for integrating intangible cultural heritage (ICH) paper-cutting into modern life. This requires injecting traditional cultural genes into contemporary consumption logic through spatial reconstruction, symbol reinvention, and experience enhancement.

First, develop a series of daily-use products under the "Wearable ICH" line. Extract core paper-cutting symbols for modular design, such as collaborating with the Shenzhen home brand "ZAOZUO" on a paper-cutting pattern lamp. Combine the twenty-four solar terms with traditional motifs to launch a "Silhouette Calendar," promoting the transition of ICH paper-cutting from cultural significance to practical utility.

Second, empower products with cultural storytelling. Transform Huizhou paper-cutting into products with narratives, converting cultural resources into cultural stories that highlight their inimitable and irreplaceable nature.^[7] The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to accelerate the construction of China's discourse and narrative systems, tell China's stories well, communicate China's voice effectively, and present a China that is credible, lovable, and respectable.^[8] By incorporating QR codes on products for traceability—allowing consumers to scan and learn about pattern meanings and the inheritors' creative stories—cultural added value becomes tangible. Surveys show that 94.6% of consumers are willing to pay a premium for "products with stories."

Third, develop Guochao IP (China-Chic Intellectual Property) to drive the symbolic transformation of paper-cutting art. Create cultural and creative products that embody both cultural depth and collectible value. For instance, design a series of paper-cutting sprite blind boxes inspired by the "twenty-four solar terms." Using cute-style paper-cutting patterned costumes and dynamic AR visual effect cards, build a "collection + social" consumption scenario popular among Generation Z, turning ICH elements into trendy symbols for young people to express cultural identity.

Fourth, explore cross-sector collaboration through "ICH gene recombination." Draw inspiration from Su Dingming's experimental case of "paper-cutting + Li Family Boxing" and collaborate with Chaozhou wood carving to develop a "hollowed-out light and shadow screen." Integrate paper-cutting's negative cutting techniques with wood carving's relief craftsmanship, adopting an "ICH + ICH" model to create resonance between heritage forms and achieve mutual development and win-win outcomes.

Fifth, launch immersive cultural tourism experiences. Design paper-cutting treasure hunts in ancient town scenic areas, where tourists use AR to scan architectural components to unlock hidden paper-cutting stories. By deciphering pattern metaphors and collecting region-specific paper-cutting fragments, visitors deeply perceive folk wisdom, forming a closed-loop cultural consumption experience.

4.3 Strengthening Policy and Educational Support to Activate Endogenous Drivers

The sustainable inheritance of Huizhou paper-cutting requires dual empowerment through robust policy guarantees and the restructuring of the educational ecosystem.

First, it is essential to refine relevant subsidy policies for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to effectively safeguard the economic livelihoods of Huizhou paper-cutting inheritors. In alignment with the *14th Five-Year Plan for Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection*, it is recommended to establish a Special Fund for the Revitalization of Huizhou Paper-Cutting and implement a tiered subsidy system.

Second, legislation should be enacted to affirm the strategic importance of ICH protection. The introduction of the Huizhou Paper-Cutting Craft Protection Regulation would integrate ICH preservation outcomes into the performance evaluations of local governments. Additionally, a special fund auditing system should be established, with a 1:1 fund-matching mechanism for school-enterprise cooperation projects. Community transmission centers should also receive support in the form of rent-free spaces under 300 m², effectively addressing the challenge of "policies existing without implementation." Collaboration with hardware enterprises to develop adjustable dragon-and-phoenix scissors could further reduce barriers to learning.

Furthermore, the Inheritor-in-Schools Initiative should be implemented, appointing municipal-level and above inheritors as specially engaged teachers. Simultaneously, general education courses on ICH Paper-Cutting should be introduced in tertiary institutions to deeply integrate ICH education with cultural identity.

Lastly, a collaborative industry-academia-research platform should be established. Promoting partnerships between universities and Huizhou paper-cutting cooperatives to create Campus ICH Workshops would allow student works to reach the market through ICH Weekend Markets.

4.4 Building a "Huijian" Digital Cultural Ecosystem to Foster Recognition and Dissemination

The internet has paved a "breakthrough" path for the dynamic inheritance of Huizhou paper-cutting. Compared to the passive "viewing" function of traditional intangible cultural heritage (ICH) imagery, ICH in the digital intelligence era offers stronger interactivity, virtual immersion, tactile experiences, technological appeal, and a sense of fashion, making it more popular among Generation Z.^[9] Survey results show that 81.3% of the public encounters ICH through new media such as short videos and social platforms, while traditional offline channels, like cultural center exhibitions, reach less than 17% of the population.

Based on this, several strategies can be implemented:

First, build a digital communication matrix leveraging platforms like Douyin, Bilibili, and Video Channels. Use bite-sized content to lower the barrier to understanding, such as 15-second quick-cut demonstrations of ICH techniques and AI-powered dynamic pattern analyses, allowing people around the world to experience Huizhou's intangible cultural heritage and appreciate the beauty of its paper-cutting.

Second, revolutionize spatial storytelling by collaborating with urban commercial complexes to create paper-cutting light-and-shadow art exhibitions. Using 3D projection mapping technology, classic paper-cutting patterns such as "Hundred Children" and "Dragon and Phoenix Bringing Prosperity" can be projected onto building facades to unfold dynamic visual narratives.

Third, establish a "Digital Museum of Huizhou Paper-Cutting" to upload images, videos, and documents related to the art form. Endangered patterns can be preserved through 3D scanning and archival, while blockchain technology can be used to track copyright and origins. Physical artworks, documented materials, and oral transmissions are vulnerable to loss, but digital recording and online dissemination offer new safeguards for the preservation of paper-cutting.

Fourth, promote cross-disciplinary co-creation by inviting Gen Z users to participate in a "Pattern Remix Competition," integrating paper-cutting elements into subcultural vehicles such as esports skins and virtual idols. On one hand, this enhances public participation and sense of involvement while strengthening collective cultural identity with Huizhou paper-cutting. On the other hand, by merging paper-cutting with trendy youth culture, it attracts younger supporters and amplifies the contemporary appeal of this heritage.

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