

Inheritance Dilemma and Activation Paths of Guigang Zhuang Oil-Paper Umbrella from the Perspective of New Media and "Two Creations"

Honglin Chen, Feng Liu*

School of Management, Sichuan University of Science & Engineering, Yibin, Sichuan, P. R. China

*Corresponding Author: 747518128@qq.com

Abstract

The Guigang Zhuang oil-paper umbrella is more than a distinctive regional symbol of Guangxi's Zhuang culture; it embodies centuries of production, life, aesthetic beliefs, and craftsmanship among the Zhuang people in southern Guangxi. Serving as both a daily rain tool and a cultural artifact in weddings, festivals and folk singing events, this craft carries the unique worldview, life values and artistic tastes of the Zhuang ethnic group. Against the rapid popularization of industrial products, evolving public aesthetics and shifting consumption patterns, the living inheritance of traditional oil-paper umbrellas now faces multiple dilemmas: insufficient internal impetus, limited external development space, a serious generation gap among young inheritors, and weak market transformation. The creative transformation and innovative development of intangible cultural heritage is by no means a simple copy of traditional forms, patterns and techniques, which would only turn ancient crafts into static specimens. True "Two Creations" means retaining core skills while rediscovering cultural values, expressing endogenous meanings, telling unique stories, and injecting contemporary vitality into traditional craftsmanship. This paper argues that through the "Intangible Cultural Heritage + Education" model, a systematic talent training platform can be established. Cross-border integration helps reshape cultural symbols and product forms; immersive digital experiences expand communication scenarios; and collaborative coordination among government, enterprises, universities and inheritors enables this time-honored ethnic handicraft to gain a solid foothold in the modern consumer market and achieve sustainable development.

Keywords

Guigang Zhuang Oil-Paper Umbrella; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Creative Transformation and Innovative Development; Interactive Communication; Living Inheritance.

1. Introduction

The landscape of global cultural consumption is quietly reshaping. The rise of national trends, the revival of traditional culture, and the popularity of experiential consumption have driven a profound transformation in the value positioning and market logic of traditional handicrafts. Handicrafts once dismissed as "antiques" have become symbols of cultural confidence, aesthetic individuality, and quality of life, with growing numbers of people willing to pay for traditional craftsmanship. Yet this transition has not been evenly distributed. Many local intangible cultural heritage projects remain in a passive state of "being protected" and "being exhibited," much like artifacts locked behind glass, unable to truly enter public daily life. Since its inclusion in the List of Representative Items of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region-Level

Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2018, the Guigang Zhuang oil-paper umbrella has gained temporary visibility and public attention amid policy support and promotional efforts, briefly serving as an important cultural showcase for Guigang. However, fleeting popularity can hardly sustain long-term vitality. The craft has yet to escape the vulnerable situation common to intangible cultural heritage in central and western regions: overreliance on policy “transfusions,” insufficient capacity for self-sufficiency, an aging cohort of inheritors, monotonous product structures, and limited marketing channels. For a long time, heritage conservation has been confined to static approaches such as documentation, oral collation, static exhibition, and festival performances. While these methods preserve technical information, they hardly address deep structural issues such as the disappearance of inheritors, weak appeal to youth, and limited industrial scale [1]. In the new media era, where short videos, livestreaming, and immersive experiences dominate public attention, cultural consumption has shifted from passive viewing to active participation. For the Guigang oil-paper umbrella, the key to easing its survival crisis and achieving long-term revitalization may lie in breaking free from the image of a mere “cultural exhibit” and transforming into an experiential, usable, communicable, and consumable contemporary cultural product, thus bridging the final gap between craftsmanship and life, tradition and market [2].

2. Dilemmas and Motivations in the Inheritance of the Guigang Zhuang Oil-Paper Umbrella as an Intangible Cultural Heritage

2.1. Discontinuity in Inheritance: Young Generations Are Unwilling and Unable to Take Up the Craft

When it comes to the most critical problem plaguing the Guigang oil-paper umbrella, it lies not in technology or materials, but in people—no one is willing to settle down to learn it, no one is willing to stick to it for the long haul, and even fewer dare to make it a lifelong career. This is an almost universal predicament for numerous traditional crafts in China: the craft itself remains, but the artisans are aging, and young people are not stepping up. The Guigang oil-paper umbrella owes its value to its complete, intricate, and fully handcrafted process. Making a single umbrella requires 81 separate steps, from selecting and soaking bamboo, boiling and drying it, planing, carving, and drilling, to assembling the frame, threading, mounting the paper, painting, and oiling. Skip one step or cut corners, and the umbrella’s sturdiness, beauty, and durability will suffer. Artisans must choose local yellow bamboo or bitter bamboo that has grown for at least three years, going through soaking, boiling, drying, and insect-proofing—no step can be skipped. The 28 umbrella ribs, corresponding to the 28 Lunar Mansions, must be precisely sized and evenly stressed. The paper used for mounting is a special tough leather paper, which is then repeatedly oiled and dried. The entire process takes at least half a month for one umbrella, and even longer on rainy days. The real life in an umbrella workshop is far less poetic than it appears on camera. Most workshops are converted from old houses, small and poorly ventilated, swelteringly hot in summer. Artisans bend over to work eight to nine hours a day, their hands immersed in tung oil, glue, and paint year-round—rough, chapped skin is the norm, and some even suffer from allergies and itching. Such hardship alone makes it hard to attract young people. More realistic than the hardship is the income gap. A handcrafted oil-paper umbrella usually sells for 80 to 300 yuan. After deducting material and time costs, the profit is meager. An apprentice earns only 10 to 20 yuan for making one umbrella, barely exceeding 2,000 yuan a month. In contrast, young people who go to work in factories or the service industry in Guangdong or Zhejiang often earn over 5,000 yuan a month, with skilled workers making nearly 10,000 yuan—enjoying more standardized working conditions, better benefits, and clearer career prospects. On one side is an old craft that is time-consuming, labor-intensive, low-paying, and little-recognized; on the other is a job option that is low-threshold, quick to pay off, and

more stable. If you were in their shoes, what would you choose? This stark reality has deterred more and more young people from the oil-paper umbrella craft. The skill is now barely sustained by a handful of elderly artisans, with no talent echelon, no guarantees, and no incentives. Once these key inheritors can no longer work, the entire craft may be lost forever.

2.2. The Aesthetic Gap between Symbolic Value and Modern Life

Today, with advanced industrialization, foldable umbrellas and sun umbrellas are cheap, light and convenient. The original rain protection function of oil paper umbrellas has long been replaced. This means oil paper umbrellas must undergo an identity transformation: from practical tools to cultural symbols, from daily necessities to artworks, cultural and creative products, and ceremonial items. They must survive on their cultural and emotional value. Few people realize that the Guigang oil paper umbrella carries a complete Zhuang worldview. The round top represents heaven, the open canopy represents earth, and the straight handle represents humanity. Together, they form the ancient philosophical concept of “Heaven, Earth, and Humanity.” The 28 ribs, woven with five colored threads, correspond to the 28 lunar mansions and the four directions, reflecting the ancient astronomical knowledge of the Zhuang people. Red symbolizes fulfillment in weddings; purple stands for well being; blue and green echo the mountains and forests. As a result, oil paper umbrellas are indispensable in Zhuang weddings, one month celebrations, folk singing festivals, and ancestor worshipping ceremonies. In short, the oil paper umbrella is a visible, touchable system of cultural symbols with enormous development potential. Yet in reality, most workshops still repeat decades old styles and patterns. Canopies are mostly decorated with simple flowers, birds, landscapes, or dragons and phoenixes. Highly distinctive Zhuang elements such as Zhuang brocade patterns, bronze drum motifs, the Buluotuo mythology, and the frog totem are rarely modernized. Products remain mostly traditional large straight umbrellas — bulky, inconvenient to carry, and poorly adapted to modern urban life. Today’s young consumers value design, individuality, portability, and practicality. Oil paper umbrellas that fail to keep up with contemporary aesthetics are easily labeled “outdated” and “unpractical.” A clear gap has emerged between profound cultural connotations and modern design expression. This gap has made it difficult for Guigang oil paper umbrellas to truly enter young people’s lives and consumer circles, gradually narrowing their market space.

2.3. The Isolation Effect in Communication Effectiveness

In the mobile internet era, communication is no longer an option—it is the lifeline that determines whether intangible cultural heritage can be seen. Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat Channels have become the main platforms for traditional crafts to break through to wider audiences. Yet amid this wave, the Guigang oil-paper umbrella has not only failed to catch up but has grown increasingly isolated: it has a certain offline foundation but nearly no online presence; it enjoys local fame but remains unknown nationwide; its products are distinctive, yet its communication is unstructured and unsystematic. Most online content about it consists of government announcements, local news briefs, study tour summaries, and exhibition press releases—solemn, monotonous, and unappealing, with little ability to attract public interest. Story-driven and scenario-based content for young audiences is almost nonexistent. There are no stable accounts, no recordings of artisans’ daily work, no depictions of the umbrella-making process, and no short cultural stories [3]. Promotion remains stuck in the style of “issuing notices”: viewers swipe past without remembering, let alone engaging. This online silence stands in sharp contrast to its offline expansion. Wei Junmin, a representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage, has upheld and promoted the craft for decades, opening more than 50 physical stores across the country, covering scenic spots and cultural and creative blocks in multiple provinces and regions. Yet this extensive offline network has not translated into online influence. Wei and his team have almost no visibility on short-video platforms: they post no

content, conduct no interactions, and build no personal IP. In an age where information spreads across the internet in seconds, staying offline means giving up the chance to connect with the youngest and most consumer-driven groups. Countless users discover and buy oil-paper umbrellas through short videos, yet they rarely encounter the Guigang variety. Instead, they turn to better-promoted producers from other regions. Fine craftsmanship and compelling stories remain trapped within workshops and small shops. Communication fails to drive sales, and sales cannot support further communication. The craft has long been trapped in a cycle: high quality without a strong brand, skilled craftsmanship without online traffic.

3. Innovative Development Paths from the Perspective of the "Two Creations" and New Media

3.1. Rooting in Education: Building an "ICH + Education" Talent Cultivation System to Address the Inheritance Crisis at the Source

For intangible cultural heritage to truly endure, the most essential element is always people. Without practitioners, the craft dies out. Without young successors, it has no future. To break its predicament, the Guigang oil-paper umbrella must prioritize talent development, shifting from reliance on individual perseverance to systematic support. In this regard, the experience of the Luzhou oil-paper umbrella in Sichuan Province is highly instructive. Faced with a similar inheritance crisis, Luzhou built physical inheritance and training bases that integrate teaching, exhibition, hands-on experience, and production. It offered stable support to inheritors, established systems for incentives, skill grading, and recognition, and ensured artisans earn decent income and dignity. At the same time, it introduced oil-paper umbrella craftsmanship into primary, secondary, and vocational schools, nurturing interest among the younger generation and gradually forming a sustainable inheritance chain. Guigang can follow a similar path. Led by the government, an integrated oil-paper umbrella inheritance base can be established, combining inheritance, teaching, research, and exhibition. The base should be open to artisans free of charge and provide equipment, materials, and venues. More importantly, apprenticeship subsidies, skill allowances, and craftsmanship certification must be fully implemented to attract and retain young people. The craft can also be brought into campuses through partnerships with local schools and vocational colleges, becoming part of local culture courses, aesthetic education, and after-school activities. Students can experience paper mounting, painting, and threading; campus oil-paper umbrella design competitions can be held; and vocational colleges can develop cultural and creative products based on the craft. When the oil-paper umbrella evolves from a distant old tradition into a familiar cultural subject in daily life, more people will naturally grow to appreciate and understand it, and the foundation of inheritance will steadily take root.

3.2. Cross-Border Innovation: Reshaping Cultural Symbols and Modern Design to Adapt Traditional Crafts to Contemporary Life

The vitality of intangible cultural heritage never lies in rigidly clinging to old forms, but in the courage to dialogue with the times. Blessed with rich cultural symbols, the Guigang oil-paper umbrella need not be confined to the single form of an umbrella. It can step into cross-border integration and creative reconstruction, evolving from a single handicraft into a complete cultural and creative system. We can learn from successful domestic practices: Zhuang brocade patterns adorn clothing, bags, and home decor; Miao silverware integrates into modern jewelry; Su embroidery collaborates with fashion brands; shadow puppetry and paper cutting inspire animations and packaging designs. They share a similar logic: extract core cultural symbols, reinterpret them with modern design, and embed them into contemporary daily life. For the Guigang oil-paper umbrella, this means several transformative steps. Systematically organize

Zhuang bronze drum patterns, brocade motifs, frog totems, and mythological images to build a clear and usable visual symbol library, replacing outdated and disorderly designs. Make umbrellas lighter, smaller, and more diverse: develop mini umbrellas, pendants, decorative umbrellas, Hanfu-matching styles, and gift sets to suit photography, gifting, home decoration, and travel, solving the problem of bulkiness. Launch co-branded products and derivatives by partnering with local tourism, tea drinks, apparel, and creative studios. Extend umbrella designs to phone cases, canvas bags, bookmarks, postcards, and wall art. Turn the complexity of 81 traditional procedures into approachable, desirable cultural and creative products. A traditional craft does not have to remain trapped in the past. Only when it enters modern life and meets contemporary needs can it move from being a museum relic to a living part of daily life, and truly endure.

3.3. Building a Communication Matrix: Creating an “ICH + Interactive” Omnimedia Immersive Experience to Drive Sales Through Online Visibility

In the new media era, quality content generates traffic, and compelling stories drive sales. The Guigang oil-paper umbrella is never short of stories, details, or visual appeal. What it lacks is a strategic, interactive, and memorable way of communicating. Inheritors no longer need to hold onto the old mindset of “only doing, not speaking”. They can fully embrace short videos, livestreaming, and AR online exhibition halls to bring the oil-paper umbrella to life in the digital world. On the one hand, practitioners can document the daily work of artisans, filming authentic moments of selecting bamboo, boiling, painting, and oiling the umbrellas, touching the audience with dedication and sincerity. On the other hand, they can launch educational short videos to explain the concepts of Heaven-Earth-Humanity, the 28 lunar mansions, color symbolism, and wedding traditions, turning the oil-paper umbrella into a vivid classroom of Zhuang culture. In addition, technicians can build AR online exhibition halls, allowing users to view the umbrellas and production processes in 360 degrees and enjoy virtual trials by simply scanning a code. Meanwhile, partnerships with local scenic spots and Zhuang cultural sites can support “ICH + Tourism” handicraft workshops, where visitors enter the workshop to paint and make their own umbrellas as exclusive souvenirs. In this way, tourism gains highlights and consumption gains scenarios. After the experience, visitors share photos online, naturally forming a closed loop: ****Experience – Share – Inspire – Purchase****. Cultural communication and cultural tourism consumption reinforce each other, making the craft increasingly vibrant.

3.4. Enhancing Collaborative Governance: Building a Diversified Empowerment Ecosystem of “Government, Enterprises, Colleges and Inheritors” to Transform from Workshops to Industries

For the Guigang oil-paper umbrella to achieve real upgrading, it cannot rely on only one or two artisans or a few small workshops. It requires joint efforts from the government, the market, universities, and craftspeople to gradually evolve from scattered, family-based production toward an organized, branded, and industrialized model. The government can strengthen top-level design and establish special support funds, focusing on base construction, talent training, product development, and online promotion. It should shift from simply “providing funds for protection” to helping the industry “generate its own vitality.” Preferential policies in land use, exhibition participation, and publicity can also create a favorable environment for the sector. More importantly, professional operation teams must be introduced. Artisans excel at making umbrellas, but not necessarily at marketing, branding, or creating video content. Operation teams can take charge of positioning, design, e-commerce, short videos, and sales channels; artisans focus on preserving traditional skills; universities provide research, design, and investigation support; and the government fulfills its duties in services and supervision. When each party performs what it does best, stable and efficient collaboration takes shape. Within such a framework, the oil-paper umbrella can gradually realize transformation: from small

workshops to standardized production, from fragmented sales to brand operation, and from a local product to an iconic cultural symbol of the city.

4. Conclusion

The Guigang Zhuang oil-paper umbrella is a rare living treasure of Zhuang culture. It embodies the aesthetics, beliefs, craftsmanship, and emotions of its native land, and has witnessed the life of generations of Zhuang people in southern Guangxi. Its inheritance and development are never merely the continuation of a single craft, but a holistic project involving people, culture, the market, communication, and policy. Times change, and so do the pressures, yet the value of traditional culture has never faded. Faced with industrial competition, shifting aesthetics, and evolving communication channels, the Guigang oil-paper umbrella is far from without a future. On the contrary, the rise of national trends, growing cultural confidence, and the boom in experiential consumption have brought it unprecedented opportunities. By embracing new media to keep communication up with the times, by pursuing innovative transformation to make products closer to daily life, by strengthening education to secure a stable talent foundation, and by promoting collaboration to build a healthy industrial ecosystem, this Zhuang oil-paper umbrella, which has stood for hundreds of years, is fully capable of opening up a new chapter in modern society and regaining vitality in contemporary life. This millennium-old craft will continue to shine brightly in the new era.

References

- [1] Lü Xiaoyan. A Study on the “Two Innovations” of the Craftsmanship of Guigang Zhuang Oil-Paper Umbrellas from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage [J]. **China National Expo**, 2025(20): 31-33.
- [2] Hu Xinyu, Qi Diya. Research on the Inheritance and Interactive Communication of Luzhou Oil-Paper Umbrella Intangible Cultural Heritage under the Background of New Media [J]. **Central Plains Culture and Tourism**, 2024(17): 23-25.
- [3] Cao Fengjie. Research on Influencing Factors of Short Video Communication Effect of Ingenuity Culture — Taking Short Videos Related to “Oil-Paper Umbrellas” on Douyin as an Example [J]. *Audio-Visual Research*, 2022(03): 131-134. DOI:10.19395/j.cnki.1674-246x.2022.03.044.