

A Multi-Sited Ethnographic Study On The Innovative Transformation And Development Pathways Of Traditional Crafts In Foshan, China

Liyu Deng

Foshan Polytechnic, Foshan Guangdong China

Abstract:

This study uses a multi-sited ethnography approach. It focuses on traditional crafts in Foshan. The research explores their innovative transformation and development paths in modern society. Fieldwork was conducted on representative crafts like Shiwan pottery, lion head making, and Xiangyunsha. The study uses a cultural gene perspective. It analyzes innovations in production technology, product design, and communication methods. The findings show Foshan's crafts follow a dual path. They use productive preservation and living inheritance. This transforms cultural heritage into cultural assets. The study also identifies challenges. These include a lack of successors and imbalance in innovation. It proposes corresponding development paths. This research offers theoretical and practical insights for transforming traditional crafts.

Keywords: *Foshan Traditional Crafts, Multi-Sited Ethnography, Innovative Transformation, Cultural Genes, Productive Preservation*

Date of Submission: 02-12-2025

Date of Acceptance: 12-12-2025

I. Introduction

Foshan is a key birthplace of Lingnan culture. It is also a core area of Cantonese culture. The city holds rich and unique traditional craft resources. Examples include the famous “Shiwan ware,” lion head making, Xiangyunsha, and woodblock New Year pictures. These are intangible cultural heritage. Foshan's crafts record the social development of the Lingnan region. They also embody the wisdom and aesthetics of local people. However, rapid industrialization and urbanization bring challenges. Changes in consumer culture also have an impact. Like many traditional crafts in China, those in Foshan face a dual challenge. They struggle with a lack of successors and insufficient innovation. A key issue is achieving innovative transformation while preserving the core essence.

This research employs multi-sited ethnography. It moves the fieldwork from single craft sites to multiple connected spaces. These include workshops, inheritor studios, cultural creative parks, schools, commercial spaces, and digital platforms. This approach gives a full view of the crafts' current state and innovation paths. The study uses both emic and etic perspectives. It respects the cultural explanations of the craft bearers. It also maintains the theoretical insight of the researcher. The goal is to explore the innovation mechanisms within the tension between tradition and modernity, and preservation and development.

This paper focuses on the core concept of cultural genes. It breaks this down into six dimensions: material, form, technique, pattern, meaning, and system. This framework examines which core elements are preserved and which external forms change during innovation. The practical aim is to provide a reference model for regional intangible cultural heritage preservation. It seeks to help Foshan's traditional crafts achieve sustainable development in modern society.

Innovative Transformation Practices of Foshan Traditional Crafts

(1) Innovation in Production Technology: From Pure Handicraft to Handicraft + Machinery Collaboration

A quiet technological revolution is happening in Foshan's craft production. This change does not simply replace handwork with machines. It keeps the essence of handicraft. It also uses technological innovation to improve efficiency and product precision(Chen et al,2025). The goal is a collaborative model: handicraft as the base, machinery as the tool.

Shiwan pottery shows this trajectory. Master Mei Xiaoshan designed the popular ceramic lettuce. He kept the core soul of Shiwan pottery: hand-shaping and glazing techniques. He also introduced modern drying equipment and temperature control technology. This ensured stable quality for mass production. This innovation is not a simple denial of tradition. It is a creative development of tradition. It gives traditional craft new life in modern society.

Similarly, lion head maker Ye Jingxun innovates while preserving core skills. He maintains the traditional bamboo frame-making technique. But he improved the pasting material. He said, In the past, lion heads had dull colors and poor materials. Now times are changing, we must keep up. For example, the sandpaper I use now is harder and more beautiful. It makes the lion head more attractive and durable. This material improvement is not a betrayal of tradition. It is a rational development based on modern material science. It represents a positive variation in the material cultural gene.

(2) Innovation in Product Form: Transformation from Traditional Products to Modern Cultural Creations

Product form innovation is another key path for Foshan's crafts. This innovation is seen in expanded product functions. It is also seen in updated designs and patterns. It is a creative recombination of the form and pattern cultural genes.

Shiwan pottery is a good case. Mei Xiaoshan's ceramic lettuce became a sell-out product. The key was combining traditional skills with modern cultural needs. The design inspiration came from the lettuce element in Foshan's "Walking Tongji" custom. But its simple, modern shape and auspicious meaning moved it beyond traditional Shiwan pottery. It became a cultural symbol connecting tradition and modernity. This innovation is not simple copying. It is a creative transformation. It allows traditional craft to meet modern aesthetic needs and lifestyles.

Lion head making shows innovation in scale. To suit modern home decor and cultural product demand, makers like Ye Jingxun developed miniature lion heads. These keeps the core techniques and patterns. But their size is greatly reduced. They change from performance props to art for daily appreciation and collection. This innovation successfully brings intangible heritage into everyday life.

(3) Innovation in Communication Methods: From Localized Inheritance to Globalized Dissemination

Communication innovation is the third dimension. It is seen in diversified marketing channels, digital media, and modern brand building. It reflects the adaptation of the meaning and system cultural genes.

In marketing, Foshan's crafts moved from single offline channels to online-offline integration. Take Xiangyunsha, known as soft gold. It was once sold mainly in physical stores and exhibitions. Now, brands use

live streams. Hosts carefully show the unique texture and drape of Xiangyunsha clothes. They explain the complex dyeing process through the camera. This immediate, interactive communication changes marketing models. It also reshapes the cultural meaning of the crafts. They become symbols for youth to express cultural identity and taste.

In brand building, Foshan's crafts focus on upgrading from product brand to cultural brand. For Shiwan pottery, the Meitao Bay cultural creative cluster created a regional brand. It integrated previously scattered pottery resources, creating brand synergy. Cultural activities and creative markets enhanced the brand's cultural depth and influence (Chen et al, 2023). Mei Xiaoshan said, In Shiwan, we might not realize how great Shiwan pottery is. But when we go out, we see its sculpting skills are top in China. This awakening brand consciousness is key for traditional crafts to build a competitive edge.

Table: Comparison of Innovation Models in Foshan Traditional Crafts

| Craft Category | Traditional Product Form | Modern Innovation Form | Innovation Strategy |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| Shiwan Pottery | Figurines, Architectural components | Cultural toys, Art sculptures, Ceramic lettuce | Form update, IP development, Function transformation |
| Lion Head Making | Traditional lion heads for dance | Mini lion heads, Cultural derivative products | Scale change, Scenario shift |
| Xiangyunsha | Traditional clothing | Modern fashion, Accessories, Cultural fabric | Design innovation, Application scenario expansion |

Challenges and Pathways for Innovative Development of Foshan Crafts

1. Lack of Successors: Expansion from Technical Inheritance to Cultural Inheritance

Foshan's traditional crafts have made progress in innovation. But they still face many challenges. The most prominent is the lack of successors. Ye Jingxun said frankly: Fewer young people are willing to learn this craft now. Even those who do often see it just as a job. They lack a soul-deep passion. This problem exists not only in lion head making. It is also common in Shiwan pottery, Xiangyunsha, and other crafts.

Behind this issue is a crisis of value for traditional crafts in modern society. The production methods, income levels, and social prestige of crafts often cannot compete with new industries. This reduces motivation for young people to learn and inherit them.

Facing this challenge, inheritance is expanding from technical inheritance to cultural inheritance. Specifically, this expansion has three aspects:

- (1) Education System Innovation: Integrating crafts into school education supplements the apprenticeship system with college system. Ye Jingxun teaches at Yanfeng Primary School. He notes, Children find complex techniques and aesthetics difficult. But their active participation plants the seed of intangible heritage in their hearts.
- (2) Inheritance Mechanism Innovation: Establishing old guides new mechanisms shifts from single inheritance to multiple inheritance. In some Foshan inheritance centers, master inheritors become advisors. Young artists receive recognition. This achieves a relay of inheritance. It maintains authenticity while injecting youthful creativity.
- (3) Value Cognition Reconstruction: Discovering the contemporary value of crafts elevates them from technical value to humanistic value. Inheritance must teach technique (Jiang et al, 2023). But it must also inspire meaning.

Learners need to understand the humanistic spirit and philosophy behind the crafts. This can ignite inner recognition and love.

2. Balancing the Scale of Innovation: From Form Changes, Spirit Preserved to Gene Recombination

Another key challenge is balancing the scale of innovation. How can crafts keep their essence while adding modern elements? They must avoid two extremes: excessive commercialization and specimen-style preservation.

In lion head making, Ye Jingxun insists on core skills. But he also boldly innovates in materials and usage scenarios. This strategy reflects form changes, spirit preserved (Zhang et al, 2023). It means keeping the core cultural genes (spirit, like the framing technique) while innovating the external forms (form, like materials and scenarios). This is not a simple denial of tradition. It is a creative development.

On the other hand, innovation sometimes requires gene recombination. For example, Shiwan pottery combines traditional sculpting with modern anime aesthetics. This creates Guochao (national trend) figures that blend tradition and modernity. This essentially recombines traditional technique with contemporary form and pattern (Ju, 2024). To balance innovation, Foshan crafts can use a core-periphery strategy. First, identify the core genes (usually key elements of technique and meaning). Then identify the peripheral genes (often material, form, pattern). Keep the core genes stable. Innovate and recombine the peripheral genes.

3. Building an Industrial Ecosystem: Transition from Single Protection to System Empowerment

The innovative transformation of Foshan's crafts also needs an industrial ecosystem. Modern development requires not only internal innovation but also systemic empowerment from the whole ecosystem (Yang, 2025). The goal is a shift from single protection to system empowerment.

In Foshan, the business-creation symbiosis model is noteworthy. In some Intangible Cultural Heritage projects, chambers of commerce, design agencies, and business operators sign agreements with inheritors. They plan to integrate Intangible Cultural Heritage elements into commercial spaces. They will spread Intangible Cultural Heritage stories via media. They will develop Intangible Cultural Heritage life aesthetics products. This builds a symbiotic model: business supports art, art empowers business (Guo, 2025). It lets commercial forces feed back into inheritance. This model breaks the binary thinking between craft and commerce. It creates a positive, mutually reinforcing relationship.

Furthermore, industrial clustering provides ecosystem support (Yang, 2025). Meitao Bay cultural creative cluster is an example. It uses Shiwan pottery culture as its soul. It connects multiple project carriers. Cultural nourishment makes Meitao Bay a new urban cultural landmark for Foshan. This clustering model lowers innovation costs through resource sharing, knowledge spillover, and collaboration (Yin, 2025). It improves innovation efficiency.

Policy support is also crucial for the ecosystem. For lion head making, the Nanhai District issued a cultural innovation development action plan. It aims to make the Lion Dance culture shine brighter. It builds an innovation system and creates influential cultural IPs. This support is not simple subsidies. It creates a favorable environment by building innovation systems and providing public services.

II. Conclusion And Discussion

This study used multi-sited ethnography and a cultural gene perspective. It examined the innovative transformation of Foshan's traditional crafts. The findings show three paths: production technology, product form, and communication method innovation. This turns cultural heritage into cultural assets. In this process, productive preservation and living inheritance are dual mechanisms. The former integrates crafts into modern

production, giving them economic vitality. The latter integrates them into daily life, giving them cultural vitality.

Practically, this study reveals useful strategies. The core-periphery approach, business-creation symbiosis, and ecosystem thinking offer a reference model. The multi-party synergy explored in Foshan is especially instructive. It involves government guidance, market drive, inheritor leadership, and social participation.

The findings also prompt further discussion. First, innovative transformation is dynamic and unfinished. The final form is still evolving. It needs continuous follow-up study. Second, in a globalized world, how can local knowledge keep its identity while absorbing elements from other cultures? This is a deep question. The Foshan case suggests a healthy model: deep roots and free branches.

In conclusion, the innovative transformation of Foshan's traditional crafts is a complex systemic project. It involves technology, product, market, and culture. Only by respecting traditional essence, through systemic innovation and ecosystem building, can traditional crafts achieve sustainable development. This will let thousand-year-old crafts glow with new life in the new era. Future research could explore long-term evaluation mechanisms and more inclusive development models.

References

- [1]. Chen, Anying. Considering Craftsmanship: A Brief Discussion On The "Mind-Hand-Thing" Relationship In The Age Of Artificial Intelligence. *Minzu Yishu*, 2025 (05): 12-20.
- [2]. Chen, Jiale. Protection Pathways For Traditional Craftsmanship Knowledge. *Special Zone Economy*, 2023(11): 141-144.
- [3]. Guo, Shanmin. The Living Inheritance Of Dong Traditional Craftsmanship And Rural Revitalization Practices. *Cultural Industries*, 2025(28): 157-159.
- [4]. Jiang, Keke, Xiong, Zhengxian. Inheritance And Innovation Of Traditional Handicrafts In Wuling Mountain Area: From The Perspective Of Craftsmanship Spirit. *Journal Of Yangtze Normal University*, 2023, 39(02): 72-80.
- [5]. Ju, Linxia. Cultural Re-Engineering Of Traditional Handicrafts. *Chinese National Expo*, 2024 (22): 31-33.
- [6]. Yang, Langyue. Innovation Pathways For The Contemporary Value Of Traditional Handicrafts From A Community Perspective. *Shanghai Packaging*, 2025 (10): 155-157.
- [7]. Yang, Zhaohui, Zhao, Tianyi, Wang Yaning, Et Al. Digital Technology Enabling The Design Innovation Of Traditional Handicrafts. *Design*, 2025, 38(16): 34-38.
- [8]. Yin Bo. The Application Status And Prospects Of Artificial Intelligence In The Field Of Traditional Craftsmanship Intangible Cultural Heritage. *China Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 2025(04): 39-47.
- [9]. Zhang, Aihong, Wang, Xianghua. The Intervention, Reflection, And Solution Of Digital Media In The Modern Inheritance Of Traditional Handicrafts. *Ethnic Art Studies*, 2023, 36(06): 93-104.