

# *Research on the Protection, Inheritance and Innovation Mechanism of Paper-cutting Intangible Cultural Heritage*

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**Abstract:** Currently, the intangible cultural heritage of paper-cutting faces the predicament of being lost due to a lack of successors, silenced due to a lack of cultural spaces, and underutilized due to a weak market. The key to the inheritance of paper-cutting culture lies in achieving a comprehensive design for systematic protection. This can be achieved by establishing a digital museum of paper-cutting to preserve digital resources related to the culture, expanding the promotion of paper-cutting products through various platforms of new media, setting up an incubator for the redesign and industrialization of traditional paper-cutting techniques, and creating a selection platform for inheritors. Through online live broadcasts and offline training, effective promotion can be carried out, forming a three-dimensional inheritance mechanism of “protection, inheritance, and innovation”.

## 1. Introduction

Paper-cutting is an important component of China’s intangible cultural heritage. According to statistics, there are 29 provinces and cities in the country that have national and provincial intangible cultural heritage in paper-cutting. Paper-cutting in various regions integrates the wisdom of many artisans’ handicrafts and is a national treasure that inherits the 5,000-year Chinese culture. However, the current paper-cutting culture is facing the dilemma of being lost due to the lack of successors, having no platform for cultural expression, and failing to be commercially viable. Paper-cutting, along with many other regional intangible cultural heritages, is facing the following issues: 1) Due to insufficient digital protection, it is facing the risk of “losing the art when the artists die”; 2) Its promotion and dissemination channels are narrow, and reliance on government support alone has led to a shortage of professional paper-cutting cultural experts and a lack of a large-scale successor team; 3) The lack of market awareness and limited derivative products have made it difficult to connect with enterprise demand, resulting in difficulty forming a large-scale business, and low income for paper-cutting artisans, leading to difficult livelihoods.

## 2. Research Status of Paper-cutting Art

### 2.1. At the Level of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

In May 2006, Chinese paper-cutting culture was approved by the State Council and included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list. In September 2009, “Chinese

Paper-cutting” was officially included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. As one of the seven major folk paper-cutting schools in China, local paper-cutting from Weixian County in Hebei, Guangling in Shanxi, Shandong, Shaanxi, Jiangsu and Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong have been included in the national and provincial intangible cultural heritage lists. In 1992, UNESCO began promoting the “Memory of the World” cultural heritage digitization project. In 2000, France launched the “Digital Culture Masterpieces” project. In April 2021, the General Office of the People’s Government of Shandong Province issued Several Measures to Further Strengthen the Protection and Utilization of Cultural Relics, indicating that the protection and inheritance of paper-cutting, an important part of intangible cultural heritage, urgently requires innovation.

## 2.2. At the Level of Domestic Local Paper-cutting

Han Lei discussed the dynamic inheritance, protection mode, and development strategy of the Manchu ethnic paper-cutting art <sup>[1]</sup>; Wu Fang elaborated on the inheritance, protection, and development characteristics of the Shanghai style paper-cutting culture as a traditional folk culture and intangible cultural heritage project <sup>[2]</sup>; Tan Sichen analyzed the types, tools and materials, craft features, and uses of Foshan paper-cutting, and proposed referential suggestions for the inheritance and development of Foshan paper-cutting <sup>[3]</sup>; Wu Peng conducted a comparative study on the characteristics and inheritance methods of traditional Guangling paper-cutting and modern Guangling paper-cutting <sup>[4]</sup>; Ji Xianghong and others conducted in-depth analysis and research on the intangible cultural aspects such as the inheritors, ecological environment, and production process of Weixian paper-cutting <sup>[5]</sup>.

## 2.3. Existing Problems

Currently, there are many problems with the protection and development of paper-cutting culture, including the lack of scientific and standardized management of production and market awareness, as well as serious funding shortages for processing and development <sup>[6]</sup>. Therefore, the fundamental approach to the inheritance and development of folk paper-cutting lies in the innovation and development of artistic forms that integrate elements of the times into the creative process <sup>[7]</sup>; in the application of industrial production and commercial operation, finding the path of inheritance and sustainable development strategies for paper-cutting <sup>[8]</sup>. At the same time, attention should be paid to the positive role of mass media in promoting paper-cutting culture <sup>[9]</sup>.

After reviewing the existing research, it is clear that countries around the world value the protection of intangible cultural heritage, and both digital and holistic preservation have become important forms of safeguarding paper-cutting art. Scholars have provided detailed explanations of the historical inheritance, origin, unique techniques, and production processes of paper-cutting in various regions. However, while past research has been focused on summarizing the past, there has been little discussion of the future. Merely staying at the level of applying for intangible cultural heritage status cannot guarantee the orderly inheritance and sustainable development of paper-cutting in cultural space. In fact, there is a risk of protection without inheritance, and innovation without widespread adoption. Therefore, a three-dimensional, systematic solution that combines protection, inheritance, and innovation is needed to ensure the comprehensive development of paper-cutting as intangible cultural heritage.

### 3. Research and Analysis on the Consumption Market of Paper-cutting Intangible Cultural Heritage

In October 2022, a market research study titled “Research on the Consumer Characteristics of Traditional Handicraft Products of Paper-cutting as Intangible Cultural Heritage” was conducted to understand the consumption patterns of paper-cutting as intangible cultural heritage among consumers. The study selected three cities, Jinan, Qingdao, and Weihai, and distributed 500 questionnaires, receiving 490 responses with 450 valid questionnaires. Based on the questionnaire analysis, the following conclusions were drawn:

#### 3.1. Overall demographic Characteristics of Consumers

(1) Age: The research shows that the consumer group is gradually getting younger, with people born in the 1980s being the main consumers, while the proportion of those born in the 1990s is rapidly increasing. The average spending per customer in each age group exceeds 200 yuan, with those born in the 1990s having the highest average spending per customer. (See Figure 1)

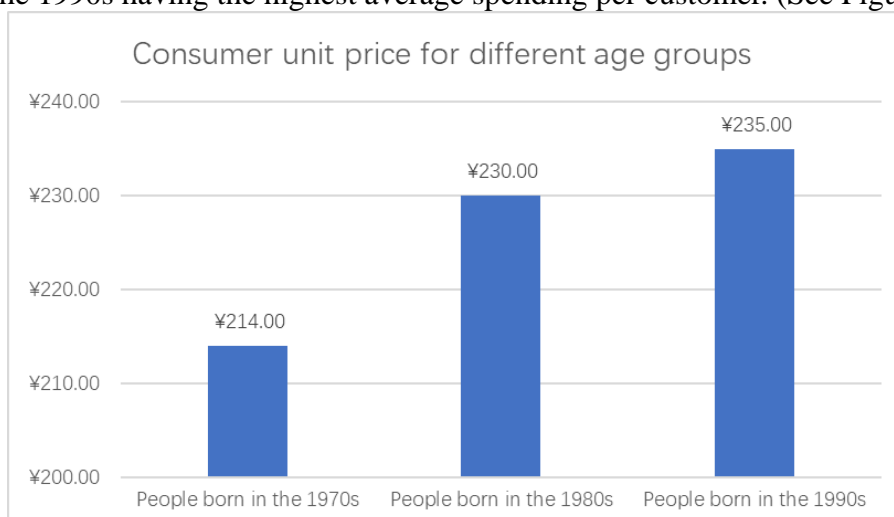


Figure 1: Consumer unit price for different age groups

(2) Consumer spending power: The survey found that half of the users have a monthly household income of over 10,000 yuan, indicating strong purchasing power. (See Figure 2)

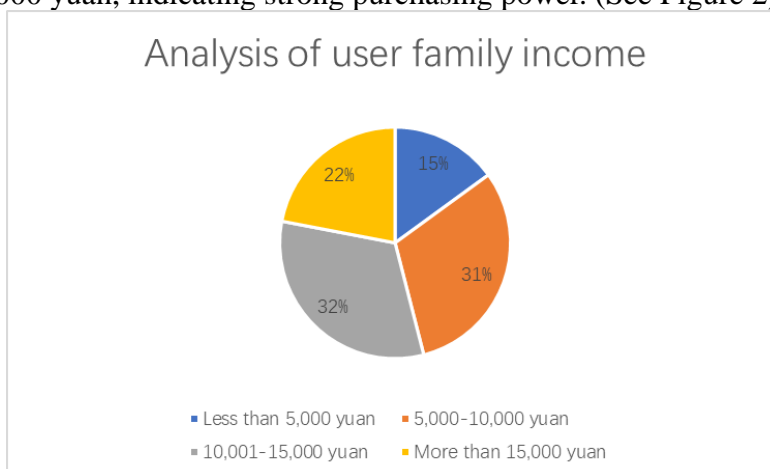


Figure 2: Analysis of user family income

### 3.2. Consumer Psychological Analysis

(1) Purchase Motivation: The highest proportion of consumers is driven by their love for traditional handicrafts, followed by consideration for product quality and design elements. Additionally, price and attention to traditional artisans are also important factors in their purchasing decisions. (See Figure 3)

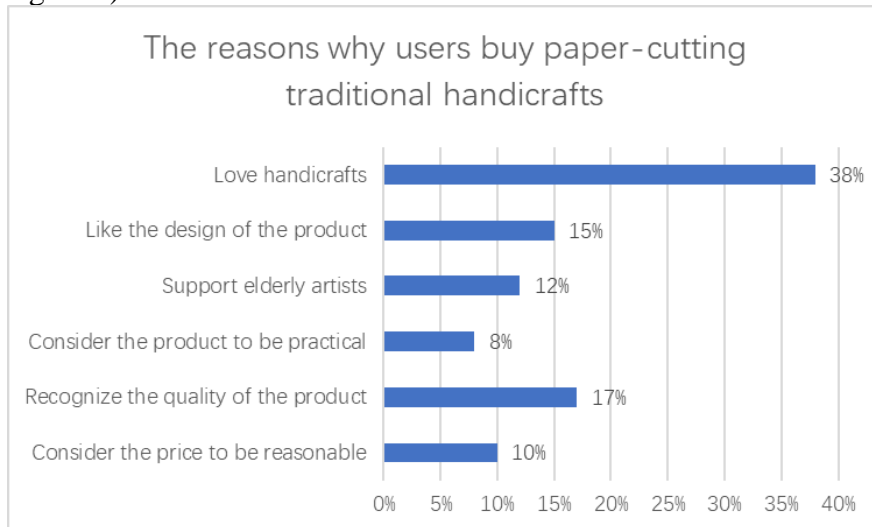


Figure 3: The reasons why users buy paper-cutting traditional handicrafts

(2) Decision-making factors: Design and practicality are the most important influencing factors for users when buying traditional paper-cutting handicrafts, followed by public welfare, packaging, and brand. (See Figure 4)

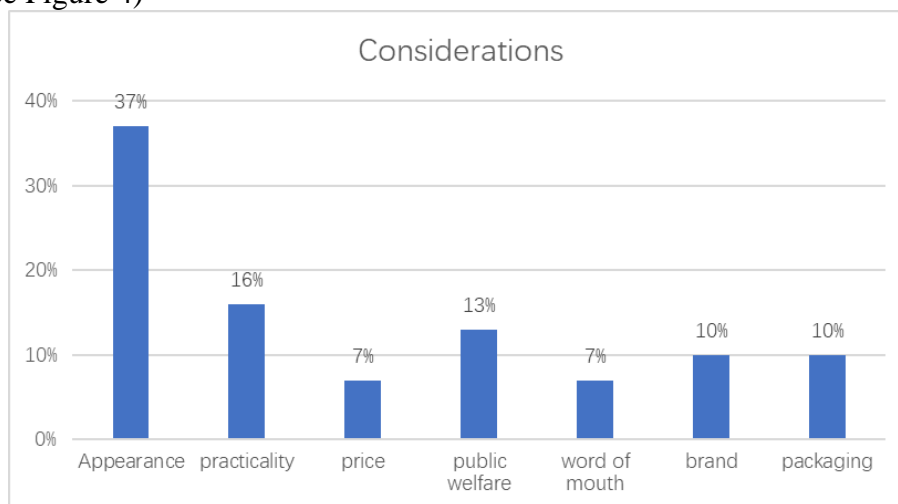


Figure 4: Users' considerations for purchasing paper-cut traditional handicrafts

(3) Premium perception: Most users believe that traditional paper-cutting handicrafts have a value beyond their actual price. The rich cultural connotation is the main reason why people acknowledge the “high price” of traditional paper-cutting handicrafts. (See Figure 5)

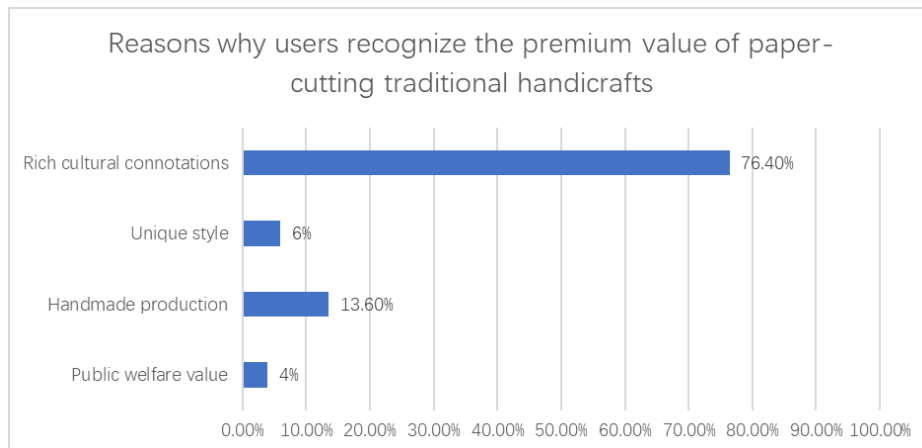


Figure 5: Reasons why users recognize the premium value of paper-cutting traditional handicrafts

(4) Reasons for not purchasing: The main reason is the scarcity of offline related product resources, followed by high pricing and lack of uniqueness due to mechanized mass production. These are the main reasons why people are currently unwilling to purchase traditional paper-cutting handicrafts. (See Figure 6)

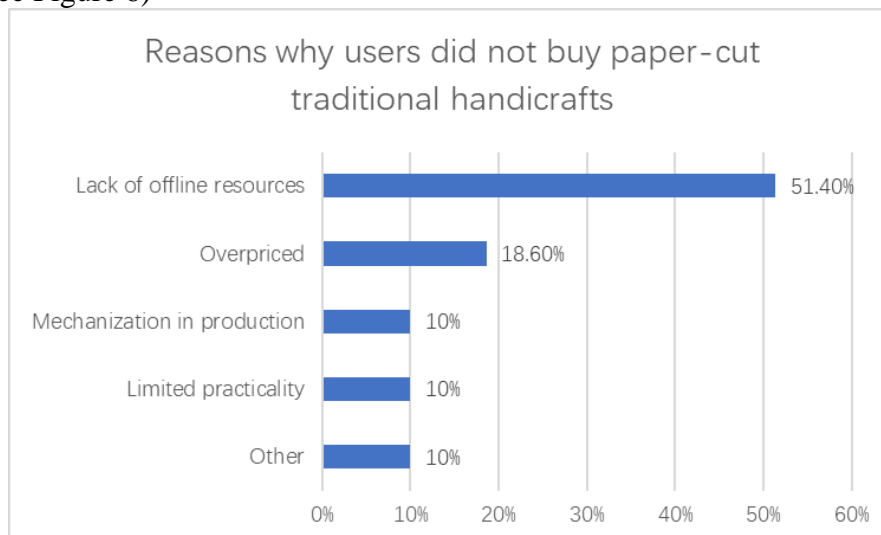


Figure 6: Reasons why users did not buy paper-cut traditional handicrafts

## 4. A Three-dimensional Protection, Inheritance, and Innovation Mechanism for Paper-cutting Intangible Cultural Heritage

### 4.1. Digitization for Preservation

(1) Digital museum: Leveraging the resources of universities, a “search for intangible cultural heritage by college students” activity will be conducted to identify old artisans who pass on paper-cutting skills in various regions, and record them through image and data storage. A static and dynamic database of paper-cutting art will be established, which includes the classification, techniques, tools, methods, historical background, and symbolic elements of paper-cutting. At the same time, a collection of paper-cutting appreciation, paper-cutting artists, paper-cutting books, and literature will be gathered, integrating paper-cutting applications, games, and other content to enhance its appeal and practicality<sup>[10]</sup>.

(2) Training video collection: Paper-cutting techniques will be classified and taught through

interactive livestream and experiential classes, making it easier for users to find and learn the courses they are interested in.

(3) Redesign incubator: Collaborating with universities, art schools, research institutes, and third-party organizations, the project will innovate and redesign various regional paper-cutting art. The Redesign Incubator will extract design elements from the existing database or traditional paper-cutting art and apply them to film and television production, advertising, graphic design, clothing design, animation design, packaging design, and other fields. The project will create new cultural and derivative products that meet the needs of businesses.

#### **4.2. Popularization for Inheritance**

(1) Paper-cutting goes into communities and schools. The project will establish offline experiential halls and virtual reality (VR) experience zones through an “online + offline” promotion model. The initiative will carry out paper-cutting cultural activities in schools and classrooms to bridge the “last mile” of traditional culture inheritance.

① An online new media popularization matrix will be established, and various channels, including the “Paper-cutting Grand Lecture Hall” official WeChat account, will be set up for online promotion.

② The project will host traditional handicraft activities in schools and communities to teach paper-cutting techniques through hands-on courses and gradually establish paper-cutting experiential halls in schools and communities.

(2) Multimedia matrix. The project will exhibit limited-edition, high-quality paper-cutting artworks made by skilled artists to showcase the products made by users who learned the techniques online, creating an exhibition area and sales area to inspire their interest in learning.

(3) Pyramid Team. Trainees will be categorized and selected to become inheritors based on their performance.

#### **4.3. Industry-based Innovation**

(1) Industrialization, branding, and uniqueness. Combining with the development strategies of rural revitalization, cultural and creative industries, and tourism, the project will establish large-scale paper-cutting workshops. Unique local paper-cutting styles will be selected for product design and brand incubation. The project will also collaborate with multiple regions to jointly apply for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status, preserving the tradition of paper-cutting in various regions.

(2) Building characteristic towns based on paper-cutting workshops. In regions where there is an abundance of paper-cutting artists, the project will establish handicraft workshops that provide visitors with an immersive experience of the traditional crafting process. Through both online and offline promotional campaigns, the project aims to popularize paper-cutting art and attract potential inheritors.

(3) Collaborating with universities, industries, and multiple stakeholders. The project will work with universities, art institutions, and other organizations to redesign traditional handicrafts with unique cultural characteristics. Using imagery from animation, tourism landscapes, revolutionary figures, and other traditional cultures, the project will innovate and develop new paper-cutting products. The project will also provide customized product services that cater to the needs of different industries.

#### 4.4. Construction of a Three-dimensional Inheritance Mechanism for Paper-cutting Intangible Cultural Heritage

(1) The organizational structure will be improved by establishing paper-cutting exhibition and sales centers in various cities, clarifying the responsibilities and work content of cultural tourism departments, paper-cutting associations, universities, enterprises, and handicraft workshops.

(2) Leading figures in the field will be gathered as project consultants, including inheritors of paper-cutting intangible cultural heritage, experts from the Chinese Folk Literature and Art Association, and folk art masters, to provide technical guidance for project research and implementation.

(3) Innovative products will be designed to meet market demand and expand the space for paper-cutting culture. The project will closely cooperate with art academies and universities to develop creative products that combine paper-cutting culture with enterprise needs, and innovate products with transportation features, red culture, local tourism culture, and other elements.

(4) A mechanism for safeguarding the inheritance of paper-cutting will be strengthened, including institutional, financial, and talent safeguards.

#### 5. Conclusions

The key to preserving the intangible cultural heritage of paper-cutting lies in a comprehensive design for systematic protection, digital preservation, widespread inheritance, and industrial innovation. To this end, a digital paper-cutting museum could be established to preserve the digital resources of paper-cutting culture. Multiple platforms through new media could be utilized to expand the promotional channels for paper-cutting products. A paper-cutting cultural redesign incubator could be established to transform the traditional techniques of paper-cutting into an industrialized, branded, and characteristic form. A selection platform for inheritors could be established to effectively promote widespread inheritance through online live broadcasts and offline training, forming a three-dimensional inheritance mechanism that encompasses protection, inheritance, and innovation.

The protection and inheritance of folk paper-cutting is not only crucial for the development and inheritance of traditional Chinese socialist culture, but also holds great value and inspiration for the protection of other intangible cultural heritages and outstanding traditional culture in various regions, thanks to the continuous and deepening research on the digital protection of cultural heritage by the media. As an essential component of natural and handicraft courses, it also holds significant contemporary value in various art education at all levels, helping students to strengthen their sense of national identity and mission, and promoting their comprehensive development. Moreover, through the digital and industrial reform of local paper-cutting art, it can drive the development of rural handicraft industries, realizing rural revitalization and common prosperity.

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