

# *Guangzhou's "Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery" Intangible Cultural Heritage: Overview and Protection Strategies*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Guangzhou's intangible cultural heritage known as "Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery." It begins with a historical overview and classification of the five traditional crafts—stone carving, wood carving, jade carving, decorative painting, and embroidery—tracing their development and artistic characteristics. Through literature review and field research, it then assesses the current state of inheritance—identifying key stakeholders, transmission channels, and prevailing models—while uncovering major challenges such as the generational gap, shrinking markets, and insufficient support mechanisms. Next, it analyzes opportunities and challenges brought by digitalization and cultural tourism integration. Based on these findings, the paper proposes a three-tiered protection strategy: strengthening legal and institutional frameworks, enhancing talent development and community engagement, and advancing digital preservation alongside innovative dissemination. Finally, it summarizes the research conclusions and offers prospects for future protection and development. This study aims to provide both theoretical support and practical pathways for the sustainable inheritance of Guangzhou's traditional crafts, and to inform local heritage protection and innovation efforts.

## 1. Introduction

Guangzhou, as the cultural heartland of the Lingnan region, has long been celebrated for its exquisite handicrafts. Among these, the five major crafts—stone carving, wood carving, jade carving, decorative painting, and embroidery—not only carry deep historical resonance but also reflect local artisans' unique understanding of materials and aesthetics. However, rapid modernization and shifts in consumer habits have posed severe challenges to these crafts: the master-apprentice lineage is waning, markets are constrained, and mass-produced goods compete on price and scale. As a result, both the cultural and economic value of these traditions require urgent reevaluation and revitalization. Accordingly, this paper first employs archival research and literature review to systematically describe the origins, technical features, and artistic value of these five crafts. It then

combines case-study visits to representative workshops and interviews with inheritors to analyze current inheritance patterns, platforms, and protection mechanisms, highlighting both opportunities and obstacles. Drawing on domestic and international heritage-protection experiences and utilizing a SWOT framework, the study offers comprehensive strategies—ranging from policy enhancement and talent cultivation to community activation and digital innovation—to support the sustainable safeguarding and creative renewal of Guangzhou’s “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery.”

## 2. Overview of Guangzhou’s “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery”

### 2.1. Craft Categories and Historical Development

Guangzhou’s “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery” encompasses five traditional crafts—stone carving, wood carving, jade carving, decorative painting, and embroidery—that both showcase Lingnan’s regional character and preserve the city’s long heritage. Stone carving, executed in granite, marble, and bluestone, often features dragon-phoenix motifs, high-relief figures, and cliff inscriptions on temple gates and city archways. From simple funerary steles in the Han–Jin eras to the flourishing Buddhist sculpture of the Tang and Song dynasties—exemplified by the Songyue Temple’s south-gate columns and the Nanhai Guanyin Temple’s wall reliefs—stone carving reached a zenith in the Ming and Qing dynasties when it merged seamlessly with architectural ornamentation. Today, these carvings still adorn historic facades in old city districts[1]. Wood carving, using rosewood, huanghuali, and nanmu, employs techniques such as openwork carving, low-relief, intaglio, and lattice cutting to create depth and luminosity. During the Southern Song period, Guangzhou carvers absorbed Southeast Asian floral motifs and Islamic geometric patterns—applications that extended from temple beams and shrines to furniture panels and ritual implements[2]. By the Ming and Qing eras, master workshops like Deng’s and the intricate carvings in the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall epitomized a mature style featuring phoenixes, auspicious clouds, and narrative scenes. Jade carving traces its roots to the Han belief in jade’s moral symbolism and the subsequent Tang-dynasty jade trade. From the Song and Yuan trade in Hetian and Xiuyan jades to the Ming–Qing court’s adoption of Lingnan cultural symbols—dragon-phoenix motifs and auspicious icons—jade carving evolved into decorative objects, ritual vessels, and burial artifacts. Lingnan artisans prized both the natural luster of the stone and the subtlety of fine-engraved lines[3].

Decorative painting dates back to the ceramic pigments of the Nanyue Kingdom. By the Sui–Tang dynasties, basic temple beam paintings appeared; Song–Yuan folk painters adorned murals and dragon-boat decorations with landscapes, flora, and folk tales. In the Ming–Qing period, decorative painting reached its height in venues such as the Chen Clan Ancestral Hall, combining mythical beasts, floral patterns, and poetic inscriptions executed in cinnabar red, peacock blue, and turquoise green—often accentuated with gold leaf[4]. Guangzhou embroidery, or “Guang Xiu,” prospered during the Qianlong reign by blending the fine stitching of Suzhou embroidery, the rich hues of Hunan embroidery, and local patterns. Common subjects include Lingnan birds and flowers, nobility, and folk legends, executed in satin or mixed-fabric grounds with techniques like satin stitch, gold-wrapped thread, and seed stitch. The result is a vivid, multi-layered effect suited to screens, hangings, garments, and giftware. Industrialization and mass production in the early 20th century posed challenges to these crafts, but from the 1980s onward, national, provincial, and municipal heritage lists recognized “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery.” Through restored workshops, apprenticeship programs, exhibitions, and digital modeling, these traditions have experienced a revitalization that merges classical essence with contemporary design and virtual presentation[5].

## 2.2. Evolution and Transmission Lineage

The evolution of these crafts has been interwoven with economic, social, and technological currents. From the Song–Yuan era onward, maritime trade routes encouraged Lingnan artisans to incorporate carving and embroidery techniques from Fujian, Zhejiang, and Southeast Asia—giving rise to a distinctive “Southern School.” Stone carvings became more lifelike, wood carvings integrated Islamic geometry, and Guang Xiu combined the delicacy of Suzhou stitchwork with Hunan’s vivid palette. Under Ming–Qing patronage of ancestral halls, temples, and guild buildings, carving and painting scaled up and standardized[6]. In the early Republic period, Western architectural and decorative motifs—classical columns, relief ornamentation, gilding—were integrated into Cantonese craftsmanship, forging a unique “East-meets-West” style.

Traditionally, these crafts passed through family lineages or master-apprentice systems within clan workshops and trade guilds with strict hierarchies. For instance, the Chen Clan workshop held quarterly skill competitions, while the He family embroidery studio used marriage and kinship ties to ensure continuity of intricate stitching techniques[7]. After the Reform and Opening era, heritage-protection policies spurred municipal and district cultural centers, along with art schools, to offer structured “Master–Protégé–Apprentice” training. Renowned inheritors—stone-carving artist Huang Zhijian, wood-carving master Lin Haitang, and Guang Xiu inheritor Liu Bilian—serve as university guest lecturers and use digital modeling and online teaching to expand from localized workshops to broader public outreach. Supported by government bodies, associations, and NGOs, the heritage now moves toward institutionalization, specialization, and globalization[8].

## 2.3. Artistic Characteristics and Cultural Value

Artistically, these crafts showcase harmonious integration of form, line, and color. Stone carvings emphasize layered relief and textured detail; wood carvings play with light and shadow through openwork panels; jade carvings balance the stone’s natural sheen with delicate incisions to “sculpt the spirit”; decorative paints employ bold mineral pigments—cinnabar reds and peacock blues—often enhanced with gold leaf to evoke dramatic scenic narratives; embroidery builds three-dimensional patterns through layered stitches, combining warm-cool contrasts and gradient shading to convey both Jiangnan elegance and Lingnan vibrancy[9].

Culturally, these crafts embody Lingnan artisans’ ingenuity and are central to Guangzhou’s collective identity. They have permeated ancestral rites, domestic decor, festivals, and daily life for centuries, carrying folklore and communal memory. Protecting and revitalizing them strengthens the city’s cultural capital and, through creative-industry products and immersive heritage experiences, drives rural revitalization and tourism. Moreover, the artisan ethos, aesthetic principles, and ceremonial customs embedded in these crafts inspire modern design and creative sectors, fostering interactive platforms between inheritors and the public—and demonstrating the enduring vitality and sustainability of intangible heritage in the contemporary era[10].

## 3. Transmission Status and Issues Analysis

### 3.1. Transmission Stakeholders, Carriers, and Models

In Guangzhou, the inheritance of “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery” involves a diverse set of stakeholders. Leading the effort are municipal and district cultural bureaus, which handle heritage-list nominations, policy drafting, and funding allocations. Art and craft associations serve as bridges between government and artisans, organizing workshops, exhibitions, and awards to motivate both creative work and teaching[11]. Centuries-old family workshops and lineage

carving studios preserve traditional methods at their source, while universities and vocational schools contribute through academic courses and research teams focused on theory and talent cultivation. Meanwhile, social enterprises and cultural companies expand the crafts' reach by developing creative products and hands-on experiences that align heritage techniques with market demand. Key carriers for this transmission include museums and cultural centers, which host exhibitions, lectures, and interactive studios allowing visitors to appreciate aesthetics and techniques firsthand. Small "heritage learning studios" pair master artisans and assistants in immersive teaching settings, and rural villages leverage festivals and temple fairs to stage live demonstrations, reinforcing "living transmission." The rise of digital platforms and new media has introduced virtual showrooms and online classes—three-dimensional reconstructions of carving strokes alongside short-form videos that document painting and embroidery—enabling these crafts to cross geographic and generational boundaries. Guangzhou's inheritance model blends time-honored and modern approaches. Traditional workshops still rely on master-apprentice bonds and "assistant inheritor" systems to safeguard core skills and family secrets. At the same time, heritage studios collaborate with universities to offer credit-bearing courses that balance theory with practice[12]. "Heritage experience halls" co-created by cultural tourism projects and creative firms invite young people to learn by doing, and partnerships between government bodies and e-commerce platforms experiment with livestream sales and customized products. This multifaceted approach ensures that "Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery" remains vibrant and influential in contemporary society.

### 3.2. Main Challenges in the Transmission Process

Several obstacles hamper the passing on of these crafts. First, a widening talent gap: long training periods, low incomes, and modern education's limited support for hands-on apprenticeships have discouraged younger generations. With few willing to learn and even fewer capable of mastering the techniques, the continuity of core skills is at risk. Second, shrinking demand and homogenized competition: handcrafted pieces, burdened by high labor costs and lengthy production cycles, struggle to compete with mechanized, standardized goods on price and volume. Many inheritors find themselves "skilled yet idle," unable to sustain a living.

Protection mechanisms and resource support remain weak. Although policies exist, funding disbursements, project evaluations, and incentive schemes often suffer from inefficiency, lack of transparency, and narrow assessment criteria, undermining sustained backing. Dedicated training venues—"heritage schools" and experience workshops equipped with professional facilities and structured curricula—are scarce, leaving diverse talent needs unmet. In digital protection and innovative outreach, many artisans lack technical know-how and platform management experience, so 3D modeling, online teaching, and digital archiving remain underutilized. Finally, economic models are overly narrow and insufficiently innovative: creative products often lack integration with modern lifestyles and aesthetics, failing to captivate younger consumers and leaving artisans without reliable revenue. Overcoming these challenges will require coordinated efforts across institutional policy, talent development, market creation, and technological innovation.

### 3.3. External Opportunities and Challenges

Guangzhou's "Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery" stands at the crossroads of a rapidly evolving cultural landscape that offers both promising avenues for revitalization and complex obstacles to overcome. On the opportunity side, the explosive growth of cultural tourism and the broader creative economy has created new revenue streams for traditional artisans. Heritage-themed exhibitions draw thousands of visitors eager to witness live carving

demonstrations or purchase hand-crafted embroidery. Cultural-tourism towns, such as those developed along the Pearl River, integrate craft workshops with homestays and local cuisine, enabling artisans to earn a stable living by offering immersive, hands-on experiences. Moreover, “heritage + rural revitalization” projects invite urban residents to visit outlying villages where centuries-old workshops still operate, thereby boosting both local incomes and craft visibility. Digital transformation further amplifies these gains. Online learning platforms—featuring step-by-step videos on stone relief techniques or virtual brushstroke tutorials—extend the reach of these crafts far beyond Guangzhou’s city limits. Three-dimensional reconstructions of intricate wood carvings allow global audiences to rotate, zoom, and examine ornamental details that would otherwise be inaccessible[13]. Virtual museums and augmented-reality mobile apps bring temple-beam paintings and court embroidery to life in museum galleries or private homes, engaging younger, tech-savvy demographics. Such digital initiatives not only broaden market access but also foster cross-generational interest, ensuring that these skills continue to resonate with new learners and consumers. On the macro level, national strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area development plan open doors to cross-cultural exchanges and joint ventures. Artisans can collaborate with overseas galleries in Central Asia or museum curators in Europe to curate traveling exhibits, while design institutes in Hong Kong (China) and Macao (China) can co-sponsor research on new materials and contemporary applications. These partnerships have the potential to reposition Lingnan crafts on the international stage, elevating their prestige and creating export markets for premium, heritage-inspired products. Yet these external forces also carry significant challenges. Globalization has driven demand for standardized, cost-effective goods, putting pressure on labor-intensive, hand-crafted items that cannot compete on price or scale. Without robust intellectual-property protections and clear branding strategies, artisans’ unique designs risk being copied by mass-production facilities, eroding both cultural authenticity and artisans’ incomes. Consumer tastes are shifting rapidly, and while some younger buyers value “authenticity,” many gravitate toward more contemporary or trend-driven aesthetics. Engaging this demographic requires skillful marketing, product innovation, and sometimes the reimagining of traditional motifs to suit modern lifestyles. Moreover, cross-regional collaborations can sometimes result in mismatched expectations or diluted standards, as different administrative regions apply varying certification criteria and quality controls. To navigate this complex environment, Guangzhou must foster coordinated innovation across government agencies, industry bodies, and market platforms. Strengthening legal frameworks for design patents, offering training in digital marketing, and establishing shared quality-assurance protocols will help safeguard heritage crafts while enabling them to flourish in today’s dynamic cultural economy[14].

## **4. Protection Strategies**

### **4.1. Policy, Legislation, and Institutional Guarantees**

To solidify the top-level framework for heritage protection, it is essential to enhance laws and regulations at the national, provincial, and municipal levels. First, the PRC’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Law should include dynamic protection provisions for local specialties, specifying mechanisms for periodic review and adjustment of Guangzhou’s “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery” in city and district heritage lists, and linking these evaluations to cultural budget allocations. Second, the Guangdong Province and Guangzhou City governments ought to issue supporting regulations—such as a revised Guangdong Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Ordinance and detailed Guangzhou Craft Revitalization Rules—clarifying the roles of government agencies, industry associations, and market participants, and streamlining the processes for project



application, recognition, funding, and oversight to enhance transparency and efficiency.

Institutionally, a diversified funding and incentive system is needed. Establishing a “Guangzhou Heritage Inheritance and Development Special Fund” would coordinate support for workshop renovations, technical research, enterprise incubation, and creative product transformation. Registered inheritors and assistant inheritors should receive professional certification and benefits—such as social security or pension subsidies and preferential insurance—to reduce career risk. Tax incentives and brand-licensing programs would encourage cultural firms and e-commerce platforms to commercialize heritage products. Finally, a municipal heritage-protection monitoring and assessment mechanism should integrate heritage outcomes into local government performance reviews, ensuring policies are implemented effectively and managed in a closed loop.

## **4.2. Talent Development and Community Engagement**

Effective transmission of “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery” depends on establishing a multi-tiered, multi-channel training ecosystem that spans formal education, professional mentorship, and experiential learning. At the top tier, universities and vocational colleges should integrate specialized, credit-bearing courses into their curricula. These programs would pair academic instruction in art history, material science, and cultural studies with hands-on workshops led by master artisans who serve as adjunct faculty. By alternating classroom lectures with studio practice—covering blade angles for stone carving, stitch sequences in embroidery, and brushstroke techniques in decorative painting—students can acquire both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. On the second tier, partnerships among artisan workshops, design institutes, and creative enterprises should launch master-apprentice studios and intensive short courses. In these settings, small cohorts of trainees collaborate on real-world commissions—from carving architectural panels to designing embroidered fashion accessories—under the guidance of veteran craftsmen. Regular skills competitions, portfolio reviews, and public showcases will spur innovation, encourage peer learning, and help participants build professional networks. To reduce barriers and mitigate career risks, registered apprentices and assistant inheritors should receive targeted support: tuition grants, internship stipends, and preferential tax treatment for income derived from traditional crafts. Meanwhile, core inheritors ought to earn formal vocational certifications recognized by cultural authorities and access social-security benefits—such as pension contributions and health insurance—to ensure long-term stability. Such measures not only validate the status of craft practitioners but also attract new entrants by making the field a viable livelihood. Community participation forms the third pillar of a robust transmission strategy. Local cultural centers, neighborhood cultural stations, and rural revitalization hubs should host recurring “heritage-in-community” events. During these gatherings—ranging from weekend carving circles to weeklong embroidery retreats—residents and visitors can try stone relief carving, wood-carved rubbing, decorative painting of traditional motifs, or hand-stitched embroidery samplers. Community festivals and temple fairs can feature live demonstrations and hands-on booths, allowing families to learn together and share stories with artisans. Collaboration with tourism operators, schools, and nonprofit organizations can further amplify impact. Educational field trips for students, “craft tourism” itineraries for visitors, and volunteer-run heritage fairs invite a wide audience to engage with these techniques. Online platforms extend the reach even further: short documentary videos spotlight individual artisans’ life stories; live-streamed workshops allow remote audiences to follow along in real time; and virtual studios—built with 3D modeling and interactive tutorials—enable learners worldwide to practice carving, painting, or stitching from home. By weaving formal education, professional mentorship, and community outreach into a cohesive framework, Guangzhou can cultivate new generations of artisans, deepen public

appreciation for its intangible heritage, and create a sustainable ecosystem in which tradition and innovation reinforce one another.

### 4.3. Digital Preservation and Innovative Dissemination

To address the paradox of crafts being “tangible but hard to preserve,” robust digital protection is essential. First, use 3D scanning and photogrammetry to create high-precision digital archives of representative stone and wood carvings as well as embroidered pieces, complete with metadata on process steps, carving or stitch techniques, and pigment formulas, thereby achieving permanent “cloud-based documentation.” Next, district cultural centers and university research teams should establish digital heritage labs that simulate craft reproduction in virtual environments, visualizing carving strokes and embroidery paths, and apply AI-driven recognition to deliver personalized practice feedback—accelerating learning and inheritance.

In terms of innovative communication, integrating new media and creative design can broaden public exposure and commercial potential. Produce engaging short documentaries and social-media videos that weave together the creation process and artisans’ personal stories, releasing them regularly on platforms like Douyin, Bilibili, and Weibo to captivate young audiences. Develop AR/VR-powered online “heritage experience halls” that let users virtually explore carved temple beams or attempt carving and stitching themselves. When working with fashion, home furnishings and stationery brands, it is necessary to incorporate traditional patterns into modern products, then launch limited-edition creative products or digital collectibles (NFTs). These initiatives will not only generate new revenue streams for inheritors but also bring Guangzhou’s “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery” back to life in contemporary markets and on the international stage.

## 5. Conclusion and Outlook

### 5.1. Main Research Conclusions

This study’s review and field research on Guangzhou’s “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery” yield four key conclusions. First, each craft boasts distinct characteristics: stone carving conveys the grandeur and elegance of Lingnan architecture through resilient stone and layered relief; wood carving creates dynamic interplay of light and shadow via openwork and intaglio; jade carving marries the stone’s natural luster with delicate incisions; decorative painting inherits the Ming–Qing tradition with vivid colors and profound symbolism; and embroidery harmonizes diverse stitches and color palettes to form the unmistakable Guang Xiu style. Second, while traditional master-apprentice and family-lineage models preserve authenticity, a lack of willing apprentices and an education system misaligned with hands-on learning have led to a widespread talent gap. Combined with high labor costs and low output, this has weakened market competitiveness. Third, the external environment offers opportunities—cultural-tourism integration, digital outreach, and regional partnerships—but also presents challenges in the form of globalized mass production competition and insufficient intellectual property protections. Fourth, by strengthening legal frameworks, creating multi-tiered training systems, activating community participation, and advancing digital modeling and new-media dissemination, it is possible to build a four-pillar protection model—policy assurance, talent support, public engagement, and technological innovation—that lays a solid foundation for the sustainable inheritance and creative evolution of “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery.”

## 5.2. Research Limitations

Although this paper achieves a preliminary overview of craft lineages and protection strategies, several limitations remain. First, reliance on literature and a limited number of workshop interviews may have restricted the geographic and contextual scope, potentially underrepresenting practices in suburban and surrounding areas. Second, the study emphasizes qualitative analysis and lacks quantitative assessment of the proposed strategies' economic and social impacts; future research should incorporate surveys and statistical models to bolster empirical evidence. Third, recommendations for digital preservation and innovative dissemination remain at the planning stage; their feasibility and effectiveness require pilot projects and long-term evaluation. Fourth, policy analyses are based on current regulations, offering limited foresight into future legislative trends and cross-regional coordination mechanisms. Finally, the research period did not allow for an in-depth exploration of international dissemination strategies under the Belt and Road and Greater Bay Area frameworks. Future studies should broaden geographic coverage, diversify data sources, and include case-tracking and impact evaluation to build a more systematic understanding of heritage transmission and protection.

## 6. Conclusions

Looking ahead, a full-chain protection and development mechanism spanning policy, talent, market, and technology is essential. On the policy front, continue refining dynamic evaluation and incentive systems, supported by performance-based assessments and long-term monitoring, and integrate “Three Carvings, One Painting, One Embroidery” into the city’s cultural master plan to ensure stable allocations of funding, tax relief, and land use. In terms of talent cultivation, stakeholders can foster a diversified ecosystem by encouraging universities, vocational colleges and studios to build joint laboratories and training centers, which would support the integration of traditional skills with contemporary creativity. In terms of community and market participation, stakeholders can activate consumption scenarios through cultural tourism routes and online creative product platforms, while establishing a direct “inheritor-consumer” feedback channel so as to improve product positioning and communication strategies. In terms of technology, accelerate the construction of digital heritage infrastructure - standardizing three-dimensional modeling, virtual reality experience, and artificial intelligence-assisted teaching - so that “cloud-based workshops” and “immersive learning” can coexist. When cooperating with Internet and smart manufacturing enterprises, it was necessary to explore customizable, small-lot and programmable production methods, thereby enhancing efficiency and personalization. Lastly, relevant personnel should make use of the cultural cooperation platforms of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area and the “Belt and Road” to expand international exchanges and branding so as to enhance the international visibility of Guangzhou's traditional crafts, which can create broader opportunities for the sustainable inheritance and innovative development of traditional crafts.

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