

# *Exploring the Diverse Forms and Dynamic Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Western Guangdong*

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**Abstract:** As a vital component of Lingnan culture, the western region of Guangdong boasts an abundance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), encompassing language, craftsmanship, festivals, and folk beliefs. These cultural expressions vividly reflect the region's distinctive geographic identity and deeply interwoven ethnic traditions. Yet, as urbanization accelerates and modern media penetrates daily life, traditional ICH faces stark challenges—aging or absent inheritors, shifting cultural values, and a diminishing sense of relevance in contemporary contexts. This study begins by examining the regional backdrop of western Guangdong, mapping out its rich and multifaceted cultural landscape. It then delves into the interplay between linguistic diversity, expressive forms, regional distributions, and the merging of tradition with modernity to uncover the underlying mechanisms of cultural evolution. On this foundation, the paper proposes strategies for sustainable transmission, including inclusive participation, educational integration, cultural-tourism synergy, and digital empowerment—aiming to ensure a vibrant, living legacy for generations to come and support the enduring vitality of regional culture.

Western Guangdong is steeped in history and defined by a long-standing coexistence of diverse ethnic communities. This unique cultural ecosystem has nurtured a wealth of intangible heritage that is both complex in form and expansive in function. As society evolves and modern life reshapes daily experience, the traditional frameworks that once sustained ICH are rapidly eroding. With generational disconnects and weakening social recognition, the survival of these cultural treasures hangs in the balance. The urgent question now is how to reimagine and revitalize heritage—not by isolating it in the past, but by embedding it within modern life—while still honoring its cultural DNA. Finding a pathway for ICH to evolve without losing its soul has become a pressing concern for the future of western Guangdong's cultural legacy.

## **1. The Regional Context and Current Landscape of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Western Guangdong**

### **(1) Geographic and Cultural Foundations of Western Guangdong**

Western Guangdong, encompassing cities such as Zhanjiang, Maoming, and Yangjiang, lies along the southwestern coast of Guangdong Province. As a critical segment of Lingnan culture, the

region enjoys both geographical diversity and strategic significance. Nestled between mountains and sea, adjacent to Guangxi and facing Hainan across the strait, it has historically served as a crucial node on the Maritime Silk Road. This unique location has shaped Western Guangdong into a confluence of cultural currents—blending the influences of Central Plains civilization with those of southern indigenous groups such as the Baiyue, Li, and Zhuang. Over time, a rich mosaic of maritime, agrarian, and ethnic cultures has taken root here.

Linguistically, the region is a polyphonic tapestry. Cantonese, Leizhou dialect, Minnan, Hakka, and Zhuang languages coexist, creating a diverse spectrum of cultural expression[1]. In the realm of folklore, the area is home to a wide range of intangible heritage practices deeply connected to nature worship, ancestral rites, and seasonal agriculture—such as the Nianli Festival, Leizhou Floating Parade, and Heshui Lantern Fair. These traditions reveal a profound bond between humanity and nature, family and faith. The everyday life, festive customs, and artistic expressions of local people are deeply embedded in this cultural soil, nourishing the rich diversity of the region's intangible heritage.

#### (2)The Current State of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Region

Western Guangdong has developed a multi-tiered ICH system that spans national, provincial, municipal, and county levels, showcasing a full spectrum of categories with distinct regional characteristics. As of now, more than a dozen items have been recognized as national-level ICH projects, including Leizhou Opera, the Nianli Festival, the Li brocade weaving craft, and Leizhou's Huahua grass weaving. These span a variety of domains—from traditional performing arts to folk craftsmanship, ritual festivals to belief systems. The region has also built a solid foundation for protection, with dedicated ICH museums, training centers, and digital archives helping to systematize preservation efforts.

Yet beneath the surface, serious challenges persist. The most pressing is the generational disconnect: many aging masters of traditional arts lack successors, placing the entire chain of transmission at risk. Younger generations often view ICH as irrelevant or outdated, leading to a shrinking audience and weakening the living vitality of these traditions. Some heritage items have been reduced to static exhibitions, stripped of context and functionality—more spectacle than substance. Moreover, government support remains uneven, with grassroots ICH projects often lacking sustained funding or institutional backing. This uneven playing field saps motivation from local practitioners and hampers long-term preservation.

## **2. The Multifaceted Forms of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Western Guangdong**

#### (1)Linguistic and Ethnic Fusion: A Cultural Tapestry Woven Through Coexistence

Western Guangdong is home to a diverse mix of ethnic groups, including the Han, Zhuang, Li, and Miao peoples. Over generations of coexistence, these communities have nurtured a culture where languages, customs, and beliefs intermingle seamlessly[2]. Language, in particular, is more than a means of communication—it is a vessel of memory and artistry. While Cantonese is widely spoken, the region also reverberates with the sounds of Leizhou dialect, Hakka, Minnan, and Zhuang languages. These tongues shape not only daily speech but also the rhythm and nuance of local opera, folk songs, and ceremonial chants. Heritage practices such as Leizhou Opera, Cantonese Opera, and the storytelling tradition of Baihua Jianggu are inextricably tied to the linguistic diversity of the region, reinforcing a strong sense of place and identity.

The cultural interweaving of ethnic traditions has given rise to hybrid forms of ICH that reflect both shared roots and localized innovations. Take, for instance, the Leizhou Floating Parade: while its figures may be inspired by classical Chinese mythology, the aesthetics often draw from southern ethnic traditions imbued with mysticism and ritual symbolism. The Nianli Festival—rich in

ancestral rites from Confucian tradition—also integrates elements of Zhuang and Li tribal ceremonies, such as totem worship and nature veneration. These instances of cross-cultural creation do more than add layers of meaning—they deepen social cohesion and transform intangible heritage into a powerful medium for regional cultural identity.

#### (2) Diversity and Complexity in Expressive Forms

The ICH of western Guangdong is a vivid constellation of expressive traditions—intertwining language, music, dance, folk customs, craftsmanship, and belief systems into a multidimensional ecosystem. Leizhou Opera, for example, is a classic case of integrative tradition. Anchored in local dialect, it incorporates the melodic qualities of southern string instruments, the fluidity of folk dance, and the dramatic visual language of traditional stage design. Meanwhile, the Li brocade weaving technique is not just a utilitarian craft; it is an art form rooted in textile production, decorative design, natural dyeing, and symbolic motifs—imbued with ceremonial meaning and spiritual depth.

Festival-based heritage, like the Nianli Festival, also embodies this hybridity. Its rituals span solemn ancestral worship at clan temples, exuberant street processions with deities, communal feasts, lion dances, drumming performances, and bustling market fairs. These events are not merely celebrations—they function as intersections of faith, entertainment, and economy. Each spatial node within the festival—from ancestral halls to village plazas and temple courtyards—hosts distinct cultural activities that engage different social groups. What emerges is a living heritage system that is dynamic, layered, and participatory. This richness of form and interaction gives ICH in western Guangdong not only expressive vitality but also the adaptability to resonate in modern contexts.

#### (3) Cultural Diversity Rooted in Regional Variation

Within western Guangdong itself, variations in natural environment, economic structure, and historical trajectory have led to strikingly diverse manifestations of ICH across different locales. For instance, in coastal Yangjiang, where fishing dominates the economy, heritage is closely tied to the sea. Practices such as the Saltwater Songs of Yangjiang, sea deity worship, and the Lantern Festival of Fisherfolk reflect a maritime worldview. In contrast, the Leizhou Peninsula—anchored in rice agriculture—features ritual calendars aligned with the farming cycle, including the Leizhou Nianli and reverence for the Thunder God. Meanwhile, in the transitional landscape of Maoming—straddling hills and plains—handcrafted traditions flourish, such as the Gaozhou Puppetry, Huazhou Scented Carving, and intricate root carving techniques. These represent not just artisanal finesse but the unique aesthetics of the region's environment.

Such ecological and economic distinctions create what might be called a “broad horizontal spread with deep vertical penetration” of ICH. Each cultural form evolves and reshapes itself within its specific ecological niche, giving rise to a non-centralized network of diverse styles, layers, and categories[3]. This decentralized structure strengthens the resilience and elasticity of western Guangdong's ICH system and enhances its cultural dynamism.

#### (4) New Forms of Integration Between Tradition and Modernity

As society transforms and media technologies advance, the boundaries of traditional ICH in western Guangdong are being redefined. Increasingly, traditional practices are intersecting with contemporary platforms, allowing ancient crafts and rituals to find new life and relevance. Digital tools—short-form video, livestreaming, and social media—have expanded visibility and reshaped how ICH is experienced and shared. For example, artists performing the Leizhou Big Drum now broadcast their craft online, capturing the attention of young audiences far beyond their hometowns. Through digital storytelling, these traditions leap from local stages to global screens.

Some heritage practices have also entered educational and experiential spaces—through university courses, community workshops, and cultural immersion programs. This has fostered more systematic and interactive modes of knowledge transmission. On the industrial front, new formats like heritage-inspired design, immersive performances, and festival-based tourism are

turning cultural memory into both economic value and collective identity. This creative interplay between tradition and modernity is not a compromise—it is an evolution. It reframes how heritage is expressed, experienced, and sustained, opening new pathways for cultural continuity in the digital age.

### 3. Strategies for the Transmission and Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Western Guangdong

#### (1) Building an Inclusive and Collaborative Transmission Framework

For ICH in western Guangdong to thrive sustainably, it is essential to move beyond the traditional reliance on family inheritance or solitary master-apprentice lines. In the face of shifting cultural ecosystems, the one-to-one transmission model no longer suffices. A more open, flexible, and collaborative framework must be constructed—one that engages government agencies, civil organizations, academic institutions, local communities, and heritage practitioners in a dynamic web of co-preservation and co-creation.

Governments must take the lead in providing institutional support. This includes establishing dedicated funding, enacting robust local legislation for ICH protection, and maintaining responsive and adaptive heritage registries. Public financing can be channeled into building training spaces, offering livelihood subsidies for practitioners, and organizing technical skill programs—relieving some of the pressure on individual transmitters. Cultural departments should conduct regular surveys, evaluations, and promotional events to normalize a “discover–recognize–support” mechanism.

Meanwhile, universities and research institutions play a vital role in offering theoretical frameworks and cultivating future talent. NGOs, cultural enterprises, and foundations must also actively contribute, leveraging their platforms and resources to spark public interest and widen engagement. Heritage bearers themselves must not be sidelined—they are living vessels of cultural memory. Their voices and roles should be amplified through public events, educational collaborations, and cultural showcases. Programs like the "Heritage Mentorship System" or "Craftsmanship Residency Camps" can meaningfully integrate their expertise into contemporary contexts.

#### (2) Integrating Intangible Heritage into the Educational System

The vitality of intangible culture lies in its ability to cross generations. Embedding ICH into the education system is key to nurturing cultural identity and expanding transmission channels[4]. In western Guangdong, some primary and secondary schools have initiated “Heritage in the Classroom” programs. However, these efforts are often limited to one-off lectures or exhibitions, lacking long-term curricular integration.

A deeper integration calls for structural reforms in curriculum design, pedagogy, and extracurricular engagement. At the primary level, local heritage can be embedded into interdisciplinary modules—for example, teaching Leizhou Opera’s vocal styles in music classes, analyzing Li brocade patterns in art lessons, or interpreting folklore-related texts in language arts. Local education bureaus should encourage the development of tailored teaching materials and promote project-based learning in collaboration with heritage practitioners, allowing students to engage with living culture firsthand.

At the tertiary level, heritage should be incorporated into relevant academic disciplines such as ethnology, arts, and design. Students can be trained through fieldwork, interviews, digital modeling, and interdisciplinary research to document, reinterpret, and communicate ICH in innovative ways. Stable partnerships between universities, cultural centers, and heritage institutes can help establish a “research-practice co-creation” model—cultivating a new generation of culturally literate,

expressive, and creative youth.

### (3) Advancing the Integration of Heritage and Cultural Tourism

Intangible heritage is not only a cultural asset but also a potential economic engine. In western Guangdong, locally rooted traditions such as the Nianli Festival, Leizhou Opera, and Saltwater Songs offer rich narratives and unique experiences for cultural tourism. Embedding ICH into the tourism ecosystem can expand its visibility and value, helping it break free from cultural silos and enter the rhythms of everyday life.

A holistic “heritage + tourism” model can be constructed across three dimensions: spatial design, content development, and operational mechanisms. Spatially, heritage experience hubs and creative marketplaces can be established in historic districts, folk villages, or scenic spots—where visitors engage directly with crafts, performances, and workshops. In terms of content, ICH projects should be reimagined with compelling narratives and interactive formats—such as immersive theater, scenographic exhibitions, and festive parades—to overcome the limitations of passive display. On the operational level, government policy, commercial investment, and community involvement must be woven into an effective synergy. Cultural enterprises and heritage bearers can partner through shared ownership models or revenue-sharing arrangements, achieving both cultural resonance and economic benefit.

That said, the process must guard against excessive commercialization, which risks hollowing out the meaning of heritage[5]. ICH must not be reduced to mere stage acts or mass-produced souvenirs. Through storytelling, immersive design, and audience education, visitors should be guided toward a deeper understanding of the cultural soul behind the spectacle—preserving the authenticity, integrity, and dignity of intangible traditions.

### (4) Enhancing the Power of Digital Technology in Heritage Communication

Technological advancement has opened unprecedented avenues for the revitalization of ICH. In western Guangdong, digital initiatives are still in their infancy and require systematic planning and sustained effort. By developing a unified “Digital Heritage Platform for Western Guangdong,” authorities can integrate multimedia archives—videos, images, oral histories, genealogies of techniques—ensuring the long-term preservation and structured management of cultural assets.

Digital media doesn’t just make heritage more visible—it expands its reach. Through short-form video platforms, traditional performances, weaving crafts, and folk rituals can be delivered to wider and younger audiences, reigniting public enthusiasm. Live streaming allows for real-time teaching of techniques, interactive storytelling, and direct engagement, breaking the barriers of geography and time. Technologies like AR and VR can virtually reconstruct heritage scenes—letting users experience “weaving Li brocade” or “performing Leizhou Opera” in immersive, tactile environments.

However, content creation must remain grounded in cultural truth. Simplifying or sensationalizing heritage for the sake of virality risks distortion. Instead, collaborative teams—comprising university researchers, local historians, and heritage bearers—should co-create media that respects historical context and cultural logic. Whether in documentaries, short dramas, or interactive animations, the aim should be depth, accuracy, and emotional connection—raising the standard of heritage storytelling in the digital age.

## 4. Conclusion

As an essential facet of Lingnan culture, the intangible heritage of western Guangdong embodies far more than local customs—it carries the echoes of shared memory, the imprint of ethnic integration, and the evolution of cultural hybridity across generations. Its rich and diverse forms are not mere relics of the past, but living testaments to how tradition can adapt, transform, and thrive. In

the face of accelerating modernization and shifting cultural landscapes, ICH in western Guangdong is not destined to fade into nostalgia. On the contrary, it holds the potential for renewal and expansion—if approached with vision and resolve. By fostering inclusive participation, embedding heritage into education, forging dynamic connections with cultural tourism, and harnessing the power of digital innovation, a new paradigm emerges—one where tradition and modernity coalesce, and local identity resonates on a global stage. Heritage is not simply about preservation; it is about activation. True transmission does not entomb the past, but breathes life into it, guiding it into the present with creativity and respect. With an open mind and an open heart, the ICH of western Guangdong can step confidently into the future—living, evolving, and inspiring generations to come.

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