



Folk

culture patterns and dissemination in Xiangshan cultural area of Guangdong Province

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Abstract

This study investigates the folk culture and decorative patterns of the Xiangshan cultural region, which includes Zhuhai, Zhongshan, and Macao. The research aims to identify the types, characteristics, symbolic meanings, and dissemination pathways of local folk motifs, addressing the lack of systematic studies on this unique regional culture. In the context of rapid urbanization and globalization, these patterns face increasing risk of marginalization and loss. Qualitative research methods—including documentary analysis, field observation, visual semiotic analysis, and in-depth interviews—are employed to explore the evolution and functions of folk patterns across different media and contexts. The findings classify Xiangshan folk patterns into four major types: craft-based, livelihood-related, ceremonial, and architectural, each reflecting strong regional identity and aesthetic logic. These patterns serve not only decorative purposes but also convey cultural values, collective memory, and social functions. The study recommends expanding the research scope across the broader Xiangshan area, strengthening integration with visual communication and digital media, enhancing protection and revitalization mechanisms, and applying interdisciplinary approaches to support cultural sustainability and innovation.

Keywords: Xiangshan Cultural Region, Folk Culture Patterns, Folk Motifs, Artistic Communication

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Introduction

Over the past centuries, the Xiangshan cultural region of Guangdong Province — encompassing the cities of Zhuhai, Zhongshan, and Macao — has cultivated a rich and diverse folk cultural tradition. Influenced by the Central Plains culture, maritime trade, and South Seas culture, this region has developed a distinctive fusion of decorative motifs and folk artistic practices. These traditional patterns not only reflect local aesthetic ideals and social values but also embody community identity and collective memory. (Liu & Tian, 2012)

However, under the pressures of rapid urbanization and globalization, Xiangshan's folk cultural heritage faces challenges of marginalization and loss. Although previous studies have addressed Lingnan or broader Cantonese folk cultures, there remains a lack of systematic and in-depth research focused specifically on Xiangshan's folk patterns. As a result, their unique typological structures, symbolic meanings, and pathways of transmission have often been generalized or neglected, resulting in an incomplete understanding of their social and cultural functions. (Compilation Committee of Tangjiawan Town Chronicle, 2015)

Therefore, this study aims to systematically investigate the types, dissemination mechanisms, and cultural significance of folk patterns in the Xiangshan cultural region. By applying qualitative methods — including documentary analysis, field observation, visual semiotic interpretation, and in-depth interviews — the research seeks to reveal the historical and social logic embedded in these patterns, their role in constructing local identity, and their continued vitality in contemporary society. Ultimately, by bridging tradition with modern expression, this research hopes to provide theoretical support and practical references for the protection, innovation, and global dissemination of Xiangshan's folk cultural heritage.

Research Objectives

The four research objectives collectively form the systematic structure of the study on Xiangshan cultural folk patterns, covering the entire process from pattern typology sorting, dissemination mechanism analysis, cultural identity construction, to dissemination effectiveness evaluation. This research not only promotes the systematic protection and revitalization of traditional culture but also provides a theoretical paradigm for the dissemination of local cultures within a global perspective.

1. To identify and classify the types and characteristics of folk cultures and decorative patterns in the Xiangshan cultural area.
2. To analyze the historical and social factors influencing the dissemination of folk cultures and decorative patterns.
3. To examine the interrelationship between folk cultures and decorative patterns in terms of cultural identity and symbolic representation.
4. To evaluate the significance of folk culture dissemination in shaping regional cultural identity and preserving traditional arts.

Literature Review

Cai and He (2015) systematically described the folk customs and local conditions of Guangdong Province, providing valuable historical and cultural backgrounds for the Xiangshan region. Their work highlighted how local customs, folk festivals, and traditional crafts in Guangdong form a rich cultural ecosystem, influencing decorative patterns in daily life. This foundation offers crucial references for understanding how Xiangshan's folk patterns are deeply embedded in local customs and collective consciousness, and lays the groundwork for this study to examine the regional uniqueness of Xiangshan folk patterns.

The *Tangjiawan Town Chronicle* compiled by the Compilation Committee of Tangjiawan Town (2015) offers a comprehensive collection of local historical documents, folk narratives, and community archives. This chronicle documents the evolution of local architectural styles, ancestral worship, traditional rituals, and folk beliefs. The detailed descriptions of clan activities and temple architecture within Tangjiawan serve as an important reference to trace the visual motifs appearing in ancestral halls and folk rituals of the Xiangshan cultural region, allowing this research to build a historically grounded understanding of local patterns.

Wang and Yan (2006) conducted an in-depth exploration of the roots and interpretation of Xiangshan culture over the course of centuries. They emphasized the continuous interaction between indigenous culture and external influences such as Central Plains civilization and South Seas trade networks. Their analysis of cultural fusion in Xiangshan provides a strong theoretical framework for this study to discuss how folk patterns are not only artistic expressions but also visual carriers of historical cultural exchanges, supporting the investigation of the region's complex cultural identity.

The *Selected Artifacts Donated by Mr. Yang Quan* edited by the Guangdong Folk Craft Museum (1998) documented a wide range of folk crafts, including embroidery, wood carving, ceramics, and paper cutting from the Xiangshan area. This compilation provides rich case materials showing the aesthetic principles, symbolic meanings, and practical functions of folk patterns. It also demonstrates how these patterns reflect the daily lives, spiritual beliefs, and communal identity of local residents, which complements this study's goal of examining the dynamic functions of folk patterns within cultural inheritance.

Finally, Lu and Wei (1990) offered a foundational study of Guangdong residential architecture, analyzing structural forms, decorative elements, and space utilization within traditional dwellings. Their insights into how architectural decoration reflects both aesthetic values and social ethics in Guangdong support this research in decoding patterns found on ancestral halls, gateways, and residential structures in the Xiangshan region. These architectural decorative elements are crucial carriers of symbolism and cultural memory, reinforcing the role of folk patterns in shaping local identity.

Conceptual Framework

This study constructs a conceptual framework to systematically explore the dissemination and development of folk culture and decorative patterns in the Xiangshan cultural region (including Zhuhai, Zhongshan, and Macao). The framework includes four key dimensions: (1) Content Scope, focusing on the classification and artistic characteristics of local folk patterns across painting, carving, and architecture; (2) Historical and Societal Factors, tracing influences from major historical events and social structures since the late Qing Dynasty; (3) Interrelation Among Cultural Elements, analyzing the links and shared symbolism between folk patterns, festivals, and narratives in Xiangshan and other Lingnan areas; and (4) Significance of Dissemination and Cultural Preservation, examining their roles in building cultural identity and exploring strategies for heritage sustainability in contemporary media. This framework supports a holistic investigation of Xiangshan's pattern culture from tradition to modern innovation.

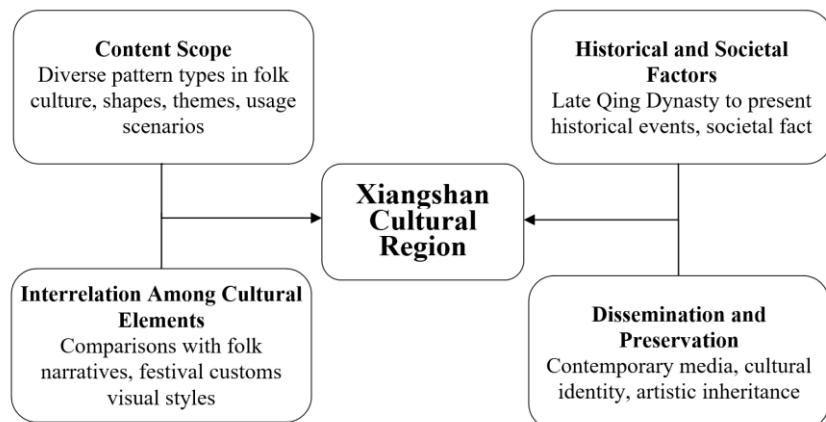


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

1. Documentary Analysis

This research adopts a comprehensive documentary analysis to review existing historical, academic, and cultural documents related to folk patterns and Xiangshan cultural identity. A wide range of materials have been collected and studied, including local gazetteers (such as the *Xiangshan County Annals*), architectural monographs, studies on Lingnan folk traditions, intangible cultural heritage reports, as well as relevant master's and doctoral dissertations. Particular emphasis is placed on exploring the historical origins, craftsmanship, and symbolic meanings of folk patterns, providing a crucial reference for subsequent visual and symbolic interpretation. These resources were primarily accessed through the Zhuhai Library (Local Documents Hall), Jinwan District Library, the Special Collections of Zhuhai

College of Science and Technology Library, and the Zhuhai Museum, whose rich archives preserve materials on Xiangshan culture, architecture, crafts, and traditional customs. These documents, which include books, photo albums, and oral history records, form a robust academic foundation to trace pattern evolution, decode symbolic meaning, and clarify dissemination pathways. During this archival research, the researcher developed a deeper personal connection to local cultural narratives, enriching both academic and emotional understanding of the field.

2. Field Observation and Ethnography

Field observation and ethnography are adopted as key methods to document how folk patterns are presented, used, and transformed in everyday life, architecture, festivals, and rituals. By participating in and observing local cultural events—such as temple fairs, ancestral worship, wedding customs, and craft gatherings, the researcher gains firsthand insights into the dynamic contexts where folk patterns emerge and evolve. These motifs are revealed not as static decorations but as meaningful visual carriers of community values, spiritual beliefs, and collective memory. Particular attention is paid to their application in architectural spaces, including ancestral halls, gateways, rooftops, and interior wood carvings, as well as in festival objects like lanterns, banners, and ceremonial costumes. Additionally, through direct engagement with artisans and cultural practitioners, the study records how these traditional knowledge-bearers recreate, interpret, and adapt patterns to contemporary social and aesthetic conditions. By comparing motif usage across different places and occasions, the research reveals patterns of continuity, variation, and innovation, and explores how urbanization, tourism, and the cultural industry are reshaping folk pattern narratives.

3. Visual Semiotic Analysis

This study applies visual semiotic analysis to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in folk patterns expressed through diverse materials such as embroidery, ceramics, carvings, and architecture. Through the investigation of case studies from the Xiangshan region—including Sanzhao paper-cutting, Tanka (Danjia) costumes, and ancestral hall decorations—the research reveals how local motifs integrate influences from multiple cultures while anchoring community values and collective identities. For example, the layering techniques in Sanzhao paper-cutting break the traditional two-dimensional forms by incorporating modern urban elements, while ancestral hall motifs preserve symbolic messages of family heritage and aspirations for prosperity. Today, these patterns are increasingly disseminated through social media and digital platforms, extending their reach beyond geographic boundaries and enhancing their role as vehicles for global cultural exchange. In sum, visual semiotic analysis enables a deeper examination of how these folk patterns have evolved from functional decoration into powerful tools of cultural identity, social belonging, and regional pride.

4. In-depth Interviews

To complement documentary and field research, this study also conducts in-depth interviews with four sample groups, comprising a total of 16 participants. Each group includes 4 individuals, categorized as follows: (1) local artisans specializing in folk crafts such as paper-cutting and wood carving, (2) cultural historians and researchers familiar with the Xiangshan tradition, (3) community elders with generational knowledge of folk rituals and architecture, and (4) policymakers and curators engaged in cultural preservation and promotion. These stakeholders possess intimate knowledge of folk pattern production, interpretation, and transmission, providing a wealth of firsthand perspectives. Interviews explore how patterns are embedded in rituals, architecture, daily practices, and digital reinterpretations, offering insights into their dynamic cultural continuity and transformation. Perspectives gathered from Sanzhao paper-cutting inheritors, curators at institutions such as the Jinwan District Library and Doumen ICH Center, and ancestral hall custodians like the Tangjia Yang Clan reveal how folk motifs function as active carriers of regional identity, communal memory, and cultural resilience. These dialogues helped contextualize and deepen the findings from field observation and visual analysis, strengthening the interpretive framework of the dissertation and enhancing its academic robustness.

Results

1. Successful Categorization of Xiangshan Folk Patterns

Through comprehensive field surveys, documentary research, and visual analysis, this study has successfully classified the main types of folk patterns in the Xiangshan cultural region. These include traditional craft patterns (such as wood carving, lime sculpture, paper cutting), patterns related to daily production and livelihood (for example, fish, boats, oyster shells), festival and ceremonial patterns (dragons, lions, magpies, lotus flowers), and architectural decorative patterns (roof ridge lime sculptures, stone-carved mythical animals, painted floral motifs). These categories show distinct traits of *integration, symbolism, and regionalism*, as evidenced in their visual form, structural composition, symbolic meanings, usage contexts, and artistic styles. For instance, dragon motifs widely seen in festival parades represent both power and spiritual protection, while oyster shell patterns express the region's historical reliance on the sea. This categorization not only clarifies the typological diversity of Xiangshan patterns but also lays the groundwork for future comparative studies in broader Lingnan and South China cultural contexts.

2. Analysis of Cultural Functions and Visual Style Characteristics

Further research highlights the rich cultural functions and aesthetic characteristics of Xiangshan folk patterns. These patterns fulfill multiple social roles, from expressing local beliefs and reinforcing family ethics to enhancing communal ritual experiences and festival performances. Visually, Xiangshan folk patterns demonstrate a distinctive blend of Central Plains artistic traditions, Nanyang maritime influences, and the regional decorative style of Lingnan culture. This hybrid aesthetic reflects centuries of cultural exchange and migration,

resulting in a unique regional identity that distinguishes Xiangshan motifs from those of other southern Chinese communities. The patterns communicate layered messages through metaphor, symbolism, and allegory, embedding social norms, moral lessons, and communal memories in their visual language. Their color schemes, composition methods, and narrative styles continue to inspire local artists and craftsmen today, demonstrating how the patterns function as a bridge between tradition and creative innovation.

3. Mechanisms of Expression and Transformation in Folk Activities

This study reveals a dynamic *symbolic transformation chain* in how Xiangshan folk patterns are used and transformed through folk activities. For example, wedding-themed patterns featuring “double happiness” characters or fish symbols (indicating abundance and fertility) often migrate from bridal costumes to festive banners and even to household objects. Likewise, patterns originally associated with religious rituals, such as the Dragon Mother or Mazu, become decorative elements on temples, community shrines, or festival floats. These symbols shift flexibly across media and functions, illustrating the patterns’ generative vitality. They follow a “folklore–object–ritual” circulation path, constantly being reinterpreted to suit contemporary aesthetic preferences or new community values. This pattern of recontextualization demonstrates that folk motifs are not static heritage relics but rather active cultural resources that evolve with social change, enabling local communities to maintain cultural continuity while innovating expressions of identity.

4. Significance of Dissemination for Local Cultural Identity and Preservation

The research confirms the crucial role of folk pattern dissemination in constructing local cultural identity and promoting cultural preservation. Dissemination occurs through multiple channels:

Overseas Chinese communities: who bring these patterns abroad, integrate them into diaspora spaces, and maintain emotional connections to their homeland;

Digital media platforms: which allow traditional motifs to be circulated globally, reaching younger generations in contemporary forms such as short videos, online exhibitions, and digital archives;

Educational initiatives: including local curriculum development, community workshops, and museum programming that encourage deeper understanding and creative inheritance of these motifs.

Through these channels, folk patterns become powerful symbols of *shared cultural memory*, reinforcing a sense of belonging and collective identity among Xiangshan communities, even across geographical boundaries. Government agencies, academic institutions, and private enterprises have increasingly recognized the importance of these visual traditions, supporting their documentation, reinterpretation, and practical application. This collaborative network fosters “living heritage” strategies, ensuring that folk patterns remain dynamic, relevant, and socially meaningful.

Moreover, the dissemination of these folk motifs not only preserves cultural knowledge but also contributes to cultural confidence in a rapidly modernizing society. As folk patterns

become part of local branding, creative industries, and tourism development, they strengthen cultural pride and promote regional uniqueness in the context of globalization. The renewed visibility and appreciation of Xiangshan patterns encourage community engagement and empower younger generations to participate in their reinterpretation, sustaining the patterns' relevance as authentic, living symbols of cultural resilience.

In summary, the research demonstrates that Xiangshan folk patterns are far more than decorative embellishments; they are dynamic carriers of cultural history, regional pride, and social meaning. Through effective categorization, in-depth analysis of their visual styles, the mapping of their transformation mechanisms, and an examination of their dissemination pathways, this study provides a robust academic basis for further exploring the integration of traditional folk patterns into contemporary cultural innovation and heritage protection efforts.

Discussion

1. Systematic Classification and Theoretical Framework

This study has systematically reviewed and categorized the folk patterns of the Xiangshan region, addressing a clear gap in the literature. Previous works, such as Wang and Yan (2006), have offered valuable overviews of Xiangshan culture's historical lineage, yet lacked a fine-grained typological and transmission-focused analysis of folk patterns themselves. By integrating field research, historical documents, and firsthand image collections, this study not only clarifies the visual and symbolic system of Xiangshan folk motifs but also constructs a comprehensive regional spectrum that encompasses ritual imagery, architectural decoration, daily-use utensils, and animal symbolism. This enriches the comparative research base for Chinese folk pattern studies and provides a robust methodological framework for future research.

Furthermore, this study introduces a "*pattern–culture–identity*" theoretical framework. In contrast to Lu and Wei (1990), who primarily emphasized the material aspects of Lingnan residential architecture, this research highlights patterns as visual signifiers loaded with cultural narratives and regional identity. By revealing how these motifs embed cultural content and strengthen collective memory, the study expands the theoretical lens on the cultural communication role of folk patterns, offering a broader communicative perspective beyond mere aesthetic evaluation. This extension aligns with the emerging discourse on image-based cultural identity construction, contributing both practical and academic significance.

2. Symbolic Function and Dynamic Evolution

The research also sheds light on the symbolic roles of Xiangshan folk patterns in both *cultural dissemination* and *identity construction*. Traditional motifs such as "passing the imperial examination" or "immediate promotion" not only appear in ritual contexts but continuously re-emerge through reinterpreted visual language, reinforcing local cultural aspirations and social values. This supports Wang and Yan's (2006) observation that Xiangshan culture sustains collective emotional connections through imagery. However, unlike earlier perspectives that focused mainly on static preservation, this study emphasizes

dynamic, cross-temporal transformations — illustrating how folk patterns adapt their meanings and functions in contemporary festivals, architecture, and digital media.

Importantly, this research establishes a dynamic model of evolution for folk patterns based on transmission paths. Instead of viewing patterns as static relics, the study tracks their transitions across media — from clan rituals and architectural plasterwork to modern city promotional videos and social media campaigns — revealing the *transmission logic* through which Xiangshan motifs sustain their vitality. This resonates with but also enriches Lu and Wei's (1990) discussion on regional cultural continuity, adding a new dimension of "cross-medium" transformation as a key factor in pattern vitality.

3. Cross-Cultural Integration and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Finally, the discussion explores how Xiangshan folk patterns reflect broader cultural diversity and integration. The coexistence of "South Yue style," maritime culture, and Central Plains heritage within these patterns supports the notion that Xiangshan motifs are not only local traditions but also dynamic visual testimonies of cultural blending. In this regard, the study echoes Wang and Yan's (2006) argument that Xiangshan culture is inherently hybrid. However, this research goes further by articulating how such hybrid motifs now participate in a global dialogue, transmitted through digital platforms and cultural tourism, thus highlighting their potential as tools of cross-cultural communication and even international identity representation.

In sum, this discussion not only confirms the systematic categorization and functional significance of Xiangshan folk patterns but also proposes a forward-looking, interdisciplinary model. By integrating perspectives from visual semiotics, field ethnography, and communication theory, the study expands the conversation around folk patterns from heritage preservation toward active cultural innovation and global dissemination — laying an academic and practical foundation for future research and sustainable cultural development.

Conclusion And Recommendations

This study focuses on the Xiangshan cultural region of Guangdong Province, systematically reviewing the types, symbolic meanings, and dissemination pathways of folk patterns in this area, thereby filling a gap in academic research on the regional folk visual culture. Through field surveys and semiotic analysis, the study addresses four key objectives: classifying the types and features of folk patterns; analyzing their cultural functions and symbolic meanings; examining their dissemination and transformation in modern contexts; and evaluating their role in shaping regional identity and preserving heritage.

For the first time, it systematically categorizes the types of folk patterns in the Xiangshan region, proposing a classification framework with distinct regional cultural characteristics. From a dissemination perspective, it interprets the functions of patterns, establishing a research model of 'pattern–culture–identity,' which expands the theoretical dimensions of pattern studies. Combining modern video materials with traditional physical artifacts, it uncovers the mechanisms of the re-presentation and re-dissemination of folk patterns in contemporary media. It further explores the significance of folk patterns in

constructing local identity, emphasizing the emotional value and social functions of visual symbols in cultural transmission.

In summary, Xiangshan folk patterns are not only carriers of cultural heritage but also important media for promoting cultural identity and transmitting traditional values, holding profound implications for the protection and promotion of local culture.

Recommendations

1. Expand the survey area and objects. In the future, the research scope can be expanded to Zhuhai, Macao and other relevant areas originally belonging to the Xiangshan cultural circle, to further sort out the evolution and differences of its patterns in a larger space.

2. Deepen the research on the combination with visual communication. It is necessary to strengthen the integration with modern communication and visual design, and study the communication mechanism and visual transformation mode of Xiangshan folk patterns in digital media, social platforms and cultural tourism industry.

3. Strengthen the research on protection and activation mechanism. On the basis of the research, further explore the institutionalized mode of intangible cultural heritage protection and the path of living inheritance, and promote the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional patterns in contemporary expression.

4. Introduce interdisciplinary perspective. Anthropology, art history, sociology and other multidisciplinary methods can be combined to deepen the research on cultural semantics, group identity and social functions of patterns, and enhance the thickness and depth of the research.

5. Promote practical application by relevant agencies. Cultural institutions, educational organizations, and creative industry stakeholders are encouraged to apply the findings of this study in policy formulation, teaching content development, museum exhibition design, and cultural product innovation. By transforming academic insights into practical strategies, these agencies can help preserve, revitalize, and globally promote the folk patterns of the Xiangshan region.

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