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Cultural Narratives in Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage: Visual Representation and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on cultural narratives in Chinese intangible cultural heritage (ICH), examining how traditional crafts and performing arts contribute to the formation and continuation of contemporary cultural identity through the interaction of material practices, narrative construction, and collective memory. Jingdezhen ceramics and traditional comb making are selected as two case studies at the macro and micro levels, respectively, to examine how meanings of ICH are formed within institutionalized systems of transmission and everyday practices. Shadow puppetry and traditional embroidery are then examined as in-depth cases, focusing on two dimensions: the auditory dimension of vocal styles and dialects, and the material dimension of stitching techniques and materials. These cases are used to examine how ICH transforms craft skills into cultural narratives that can be perceived and transmitted. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining narrative theory and visual semiotics, and proposes a four-stage analytical framework of "material — narrative—collective memory—identity" to trace how ICH develops from craft practices into forms of cultural identity. This thesis provides a transferable theoretical framework for understanding the living transmission of ICH and offers a comparative perspective on identity construction in visual and material culture studies.

Keywords: Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Narratives, Visual Representation, Material Practice, Collective Memory, Cultural Identity.

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Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Globalization has remade daily life, and cultural diversity is no exception. Industrial standardization made life easier in a lot of concrete ways. Consumer culture spread the same products, the same habits, into places that used to look nothing alike. But that same process has been wearing away at local traditions, slowly enough that it's easy to miss happening in real time.

In the 1990s, the concept of intangible cultural heritage entered international policy discourse. By 2026, more than 180 countries have acceded to the Convention, establishing a common legal framework for identifying, protecting, and transmitting ICH worldwide. Article 2 defines ICH as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage."[1] This definition moves away from the old object-centred view of heritage (artifacts, sites, buildings) and instead puts the focus back on the communities and groups who actually create and carry these traditions.[2] China joined the Convention in 2004, and after more than two decades of practice, it has established a four-tier inventory system at the national, provincial, municipal, and county levels. By 2026, there are 1,372 national-level representative projects alone, 40 of which are inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List—making China the country with the highest number of entries worldwide.[3]The Ministry of Culture and Tourism divides these into ten major categories: folk literature, traditional music, dance, theater, folk arts, sports and acrobatics, fine arts, crafts, medicine, and folklore. This system broadly corresponds to UNESCO's five domains (oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, traditional knowledge, and crafts), but it also reflects distinct Chinese cultural traits and historical contexts."[4]

Despite these extensive policy systems and preservation efforts, one theoretical question is often overlooked. Most administrative approaches focus on documenting skills and standardizing procedures, but the life of ICH depends on its ability to carry meaning. As Richard Kurin notes, its value lies not in physical carriers, but in the meanings generated through practice—meanings that give communities a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing world.[5] Understood in this way, ICH functions as a

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[1] UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, Article 2, section 1.
[2] Laurajane Smith, Uses of Heritage (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 11–29.
[3] https://www.mct.gov.cn (Data released in 2026)
[4] UNESCO "Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," Article 2.2.
[5] Kurin, Richard, 'Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage: Key Factors in Implementing the 2003 Convention', *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, vol. 2, 2007, pp. 9–20.

narrative medium through which memory and symbols are passed on, more than a set of techniques.

This study examines four such practices—porcelain, comb-making, shadow puppetry, and embroidery—across a historical arc that runs from dynastic workshops to contemporary visual culture. To locate them in time, Figure 1 makes a parallel between Chinese dynasties and European history, offering a reference point for international readers while underscoring that these traditions are not frozen in the past. They have persisted and been contextualised again across centuries.

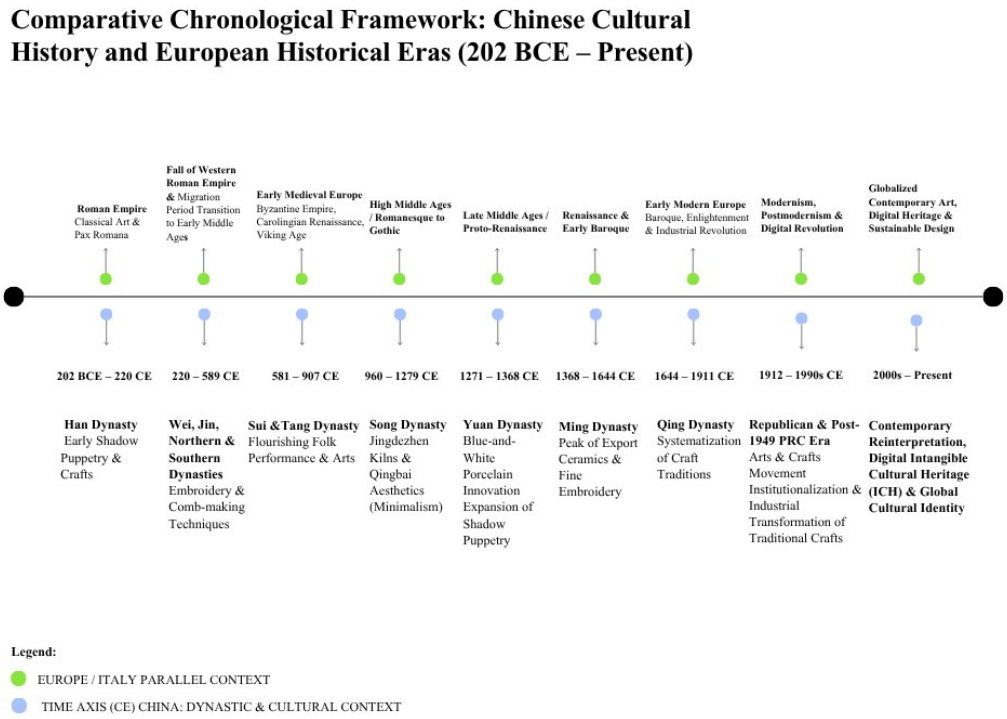


Figure 1Comparative Chronological Framework: Chinese Cultural History and European Historical Eras (202 BCE – Present) Source: Author's elaboration.

1.2 Research Objective

This study examines how intangible cultural heritage in China functions as a living narrative medium and participates in the construction of multi-level cultural identities in contemporary society. Rather than simply cataloguing heritage skills, this study examines how these practices are remade by the communities who carry them across changing times, and what significant narratives they generate in the process.

The analysis looks at how craft practices, visual symbols, oral traditions, and transmission modes are transformed into cultural narratives, examining how these

narratives sustain historical continuity and local community experience through the production of collective memory. It also explores the pathways through which cultural narratives generate identity: how the symbolic meanings carried by ICH are dynamically formed through local experience, historical memory, and everyday practice, and how ICH facilitates a sense of cultural belonging across individual, community, and national levels.

The research design includes a comparative baseline that focuses on traditional ceramic handcrafts in Jingdezhen and traditional wooden comb making. Two in-depth case studies then examine shadow puppetry, which relies on oral performance and theatrical narrative, and Chinese embroidery, which centres on visual aesthetics and gendered labour narratives, to test and refine the theoretical approach.

Through this multi-stage design, the study intends to show that cultural narrative in ICH is not a static, singular heritage transmission, but a living process that is continuously generated through the dynamic interaction of historical continuity and local practice.

1.3 Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative research approach, supplemented by narrative theory and visual semiotics.

A literature review establishes the theoretical foundation and historical baseline. Primary sources include official UNESCO documents and conventions. Chinese academic literature provides additional grounding for discussing how ICH intersects with identity construction and visual culture.

A comparative analysis then examines two nationally designated ICH practices: Jingdezhen ceramic craft and traditional wooden comb-making. Jingdezhen is embedded in a larger, institutionalized heritage system with established artisan communities. Wooden comb-making is localized and micro-scale, tied to family routines and daily practice. Comparing these two traditions brings into focus the different ways craft heritage is transmitted and gains recognition across social levels. The resulting contrast establishes a baseline for examining the two subsequent case studies—shadow puppetry and embroidery.

The final component is case analysis, focusing on shadow puppetry and Chinese embroidery. The same comparative framework is applied to cases to ensure consistent interpretation. Using visual semiotics, the study examines the shared visual motifs and material aesthetics of embroidery and shadow puppetry, while also drawing on narrative theory to analyze the oral performance and master-apprentice transmission inherent in puppetry. Interpreting these dimensions across both cases allows for targeted comparisons of how ICH functions as a living medium of identity.

2.ICH and cultural narratives, identity

2.1.1 The Genealogy of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Concept

The 2003 UNESCO Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as living practices that communities recognize as part of their heritage.[6] This definition shifts heritage from objects to processes—and that shift is central to this study, because it opens up the question of how ICH carries meaning and constructing identity. Historically, ICH emerged from agrarian societies, where manual labor and local custom shaped everyday life. The Industrial Revolution disrupted this order, replacing artisanal production with mechanized manufacturing and eroding the material foundation of traditional culture. As modernity advanced, the loss became visible, and with it, the impulse to protect what remained. This concept took time to find its institutional form. The legal concept of heritage originated in the French Revolution, when "patrimoine" was used to protect royal monuments.[7]That object-focused approach persisted for two centuries and shaped the 1972 UNESCO Convention, which limited cultural heritage to monuments, buildings, and sites. Music, dance, oral traditions, and crafts were not covered. This gap gave rise to the concept of intangible cultural heritage in the 1990s.

Although the 1972 Convention concentrated on tangible heritages, it also revealed the limitations of such an approach. Many forms of cultural expression could not easily be accommodated within a framework centred on physical objects. So the discussion shifted from protecting cultural objects toward living practices.

This shift was informed in part by developments in East Asia, particularly Japan. As early as 1950, Japan had introduced legal protection for non-material forms of culture through the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. The law established a category of Intangible Cultural Properties (mukei bunkazai), covering theatre, music, craft techniques, other cultural practices considered to possess significant historical or artistic value.[8]Japan's early experience with protecting intangible cultural properties had a clear influence on UNESCO's direction in the 1980s and 1990s. Two documents from this period—the 1989 *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* and the 1998 *Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*—pushed the discussion forward.[9] They stopped short of offering a legal definition of ICH, yet they made two things clear: the 1972 framework could not adequately cover oral traditions, performing arts, or craftsmanship, and a broader approach was needed.

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[6] UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), Article 2.

[7] Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, trans. Lauren M. O'Connell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 63–65.

[8] Japan's *Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties* (enacted in 1950 and subsequently revised)

[9] UNESCO, *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* (Paris: UNESCO, 15 November 1989); UNESCO, *Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* (Paris: UNESCO, 1998)

This process culminated in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,[10]which remains the principal international framework for ICH today. Instead of treating heritage primarily as a collection of valuable objects, it recognised heritage as a living process, sustained by communities through continuous practice and transmission. That understanding has informed most subsequent ICH research, **and provides** the foundation for examining heritage as a living narrative medium in this thesis.

2.1.2 The Definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Article 2.1 of the 2003 UNESCO Convention officially defines intangible cultural heritage:" the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and sometimes individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage."[11]

The Convention puts communities, not experts or officials, at the centre of the definition. For a long time, outside experts and government officials decided what was worth preserving. The 2003 Convention reverses that order. A craft or ritual is not heritage because an expert says it is. It becomes heritage when the people who practise it see it as part of their own lives and identity.

The definition also states that these practices are transmitted across generations and constantly recreated by communities as they respond to their environment and history. This challenges the older view that heritage must remain unchanged. The phrase "constantly recreated" suggests that a tradition does not lose its authenticity simply because it evolves. It may need to change in order to persist. Transmission, moreover, does not happen mainly through formal schooling. It depends on master-apprentice relationships, oral transmission within families, and collective community rituals. The Convention suggests that this process gives people a sense of identity and continuity in a changing world.

2.1.3 Classification Framework

The 2003 Convention identifies five broad domains of intangible cultural heritage: oral traditions and expressions, performing arts (music, dance, and theatre), social practices and rituals, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. [12]These categories are not meant to be strict boundaries. A single cultural practice often cuts across multiple domains.

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[10] UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO, 17 October 2003)

[11] UNESCO, "Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage," Article 2.1.

[12] UNESCO, *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), Article 2.2.

Shadow puppetry is one case. It is performed as a theatrical show, but it also involves the craft of puppet-making and draws on oral storytelling and local scripts. The UNESCO Representative List reflects this interconnectedness: heritage practices rarely fit neatly into one box; they move across categories, and that movement is part of what makes them alive.[13]

China's national inventory divides intangible cultural heritage into ten categories: folk literature; traditional music; traditional dance; traditional theater; storytelling and folk arts; traditional sports, games, and acrobatics; traditional fine arts; traditional crafts; traditional medicine; and folk customs.[14] Five of the categories were renamed in 2008. This detailed system adapts the global heritage framework to Chinese administrative practice. It stays broadly consistent with UNESCO's five domains, but expands the classification to a finer level of detail to fit local conditions (Figure 2).

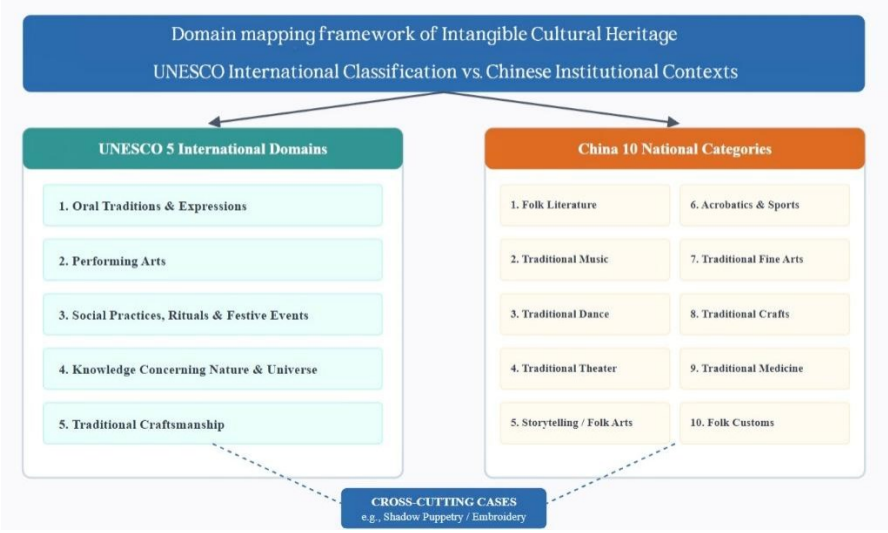


Figure 2

Domain Mapping Framework of Intangible Cultural Heritage: UNESCO International Classification vs. Chinese Institutional Contexts.(Source: Conceptualized and drawn by the author based on UNESCO 2003 Convention and Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the PRC data.)

2.2From Fact to Cultural Identity

2.2.1 Cultural Narrative and the Collective Memory

Reducing cultural heritage to individual objects or traditions can overlook much of its historical and social context. A tradition is not meaningful simply because it has existed for a long time. Its significance is also shaped by the way people remember it, talk about

[13] UNESCO, "Chinese Shadow Puppetry," Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Sixth Session, Inscribed in 2011 (6.COM 13.14) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Bali, Indonesia, November 22–29, 2011.

[14] Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, *National Representative Items of Intangible Cultural Heritage List*, accessed August 2026, http://www.ihchina.cn/.

it, and understand it in the present. These processes are closely connected. What people remember influences how a tradition is interpreted, while these interpretations can also affect what is remembered and passed on to others.

Narrative offers a way of turning the past into something meaningful. David Lowenthal, in *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, observed that historical remains possess a quality of "otherness" to those who inherit them. The past, he wrote, is both "historically other" and "culturally other." Because the past arrives as something foreign and fragmented, it cannot simply be recorded—it must be reshaped through narrative into something that can be understood and carried forward.[15] This process structures facts and memories into coherent accounts, allowing communities to interpret their history and make sense of shared experience. Narratives also shape how events are understood and remembered over time, functioning as a form of collective memory oriented toward the past. Facts are filtered through emotion and recombined from scattered stories and everyday fragments. This reworking makes heritage feel relevant in the present.

While narratives provide a framework for organising cultural meanings, they do not remain meaningful simply by having been told once. For narratives to survive across generations, they should be continually remembered, and reinterpreted within a community. As Lopez, van Alphen, and Carmona argue in a recent review, narratives serve as a central cultural mediator of collective memory—not simply recording the past, but actively shaping how communities understand and reproduce it.[16]In China, many forms of ICH have historically been passed down through close-knit social ties—families, local communities, and apprenticeship networks. Festivals and craftsmanship live more in collective memory than in individual recollection. Each round of participation reinforces the same cultural narratives.

2.2.2 Cultural Identity

The connection between cultural narrative and identity can be seen in the way communities understand their past. The stories that are remembered and passed on can influence how people see their own culture and their place within it. Cultural identity involves a sense of belonging to a particular community. People also develop it through their understanding of the community's history, practices, and values. Usborne and Sablonniere found that clarity about one's cultural identity contributes to personal identity clarity and psychological well-being. Their research also shows that engaging with heritage narratives can have an impact on individuals as well as on the wider community.[17]

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[15] David Lowenthal, The Past Is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)1–15.
[16] Cesar Lopez, Floor van Alphen, and Laura Carmona, "Narratives and Collective Memory," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 65 (2025): 102087.
[17] Usborne, Esther; Sablonniere, Roxane (December 2014). "Understanding My Culture Means Understanding Myself: The Function of Cultural Identity Clarity for Personal Identity Clarity and Personal Psychological Well Being". Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour. 44 (4): 436.

2.2.3Analytical Framework: The Dynamic Cycle of Heritage Transmission

When analysing intangible cultural heritage, the first thing that can be identified is the material practice and the facts surrounding it. These may include the material, technique, form, place, history, or other concrete aspects of a heritage practice. These facts alone could not explain why a practice is understood as culturally significant. Behind them, there are usually stories and meanings that have been selected and passed on in particular ways. This process brings the material practice into the level of narrative. Hayden White argues that historical events do not arrange themselves into coherent accounts; they are shaped through selection, ordering, and connection.[18] Applied to heritage transmission, this means that when a master teaches an apprentice, the story told about the craft is always a choice. Some aspects of a practice may be emphasised, while others receive less attention.

Once repeated enough to settle into a community's shared understanding, narrative becomes memory. James V. Wertsch describes this through the concept of schematic narrative templates—recurring patterns that structure what a community remembers and what it forgets.[19] In ICH, this explains why some stories persist across generations while others fade. These memories then provide a basis for the final level of analysis, cultural identity. The way people remember and understand a heritage practice can affect how they see their connection with the community and its cultural past。As Stuart Hall understands cultural identity not as a fixed core but it could be constantly produced through representation and practice.[20]

These three moments loop back on each other. This study uses four connected dimensions to examine intangible cultural heritage: material facts, narrative, collective memory, and cultural identity. The four dimensions do not represent four separate stages of heritage itself. Rather, they provide four ways of looking at the same heritage practice, moving from what can be materially identified, to how its meaning is narrated, how that narrative becomes part of shared memory, and finally how it relates to identity.

3. Jingdezhen

3.1 Historical Facts and Material Remains

Ceramic production in Jingdezhen dates back over a thousand years. Its location in southeastern China, not far from the commercial ports of the Yangtze Delta and within reach of Shanghai (figure 3) . The earliest activity remains unclear—some accounts place it in the Han dynasty, others in the Eastern Jin. By the Tang period, the kilns in

[18] Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1–25

[19] James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and James V. Wertsch, *How Nations Remember: A Narrative Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[20] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–237.

the area, then known as Changnan, were already supplying porcelain to the imperial court (figure 4). The name changed in the



Song dynasty, when Emperor Zhenzong ordered porcelain fired there for court use and gave his reign title, Jingde, to the place. That was around the year 1004. The kilns kept running.



Figure 4 The brick vault architecture of the Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum, designed by Studio Zhu-Pei around the historical imperial kiln site. (Source: Studio Zhu-Pei / Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum

Archives.)

Jingdezhen set apart from other regional ceramic centres because of the prolonged attention of the imperial court. In 1369, the Ming court established the Imperial Kiln Factory site in the centre of what is now the modern city.[21] It operated for over five centuries. Since the 1980s, archaeologists have been carrying out excavation, uncovering discarded imperial ceramics, kiln furniture, and production waste (figure 5). All of this material now rests in a public archaeological park.[22] Nowadays people are walking over five hundred years' worth of objects that the court once deemed unfit for its own use.



Figure 5 Interior view of the museum showing the *in-situ* preservation of the Ming and Qing Dynasty imperial kiln ruins. (Source: Official Photography, Jingdezhen Imperial Kiln Museum.)

Beyond the kiln site itself, the material traces of ceramic production spread across the whole region. Kaolin deposits and porcelain stone quarries sit out in the hills. Closer in, there were areas set aside just for producing kiln fuel. In the dense urban core, the actual manufacturing running through the middle of it all.[23] Its rise depended on something bigger than workshops or kilns. Raw material had to get in. A workforce was divided down to a fine degree had to be organised. It was also kept fed with work. And all of it had to move. For instance, clay to workshop, fuel to kiln, finished pieces out to market. Therefore transport links in Jingdezhen mattered as much as any single technical skill. Different stages of production ended up scattered across the local landscape, not clustered in one place. Scholars have described Jingdezhen's urban space as one of the

[21] Jingdezhen City Institute of Ceramic Archaeology et al., “Brief Report on the 2014 Excavation of the Ming and Qing Imperial Kiln Site in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi,” Cultural Relics, No. 8, 2017, pp. 4–5.
[22] Jingdezhen City Institute of Ceramic Archaeology et al., “Brief Report on the 2014 Excavation of the Ming and Qing Imperial Kiln Site in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi,” Cultural Relics, No. 8, 2017, pp. 6

[23] UNESCO World Heritage Committee, Nomination File for "Jingdezhen Handcraft Porcelain Industrial Heritage," submitted January 2025, section 3.1.

most thoroughly production-organised cities of its kind.[24]

By the Ming period, this spatially dispersed system had become a finely divided division of labour. A single vessel might be worked on by many specialists, each responsible for only one step. The Tao Ya, a Qing text on ceramics, says that skilled workers stuck to one stage and never moved beyond it.[25]This kept quality high, but it also meant no one person ever knew the whole process. Each one only knew his own bit, and the finished piece happened when all those bits came together. The complete technical sequence of traditional Jingdezhen porcelain production and its collaborative labor structure are visually illustrated below (Figure 6-8)



Figure 6 *Illustrations of Porcelain Manufacture* (Qianlong Period, 1753), depicting the sequential 18-step production workflow in Jingdezhe (Part I: Steps 1–6): (1) Mining for stone and preparing clay; (2) Washing and purifying clay; (3) Burning ash and preparing glaze; (4) Manufacturing saggars; (5) Preparing moulds for round ware; (6) Throwing round ware on wheel. (Source: Tang Ying, 1753)

[24] Xiaoqin Wang et al., "Spatial Organization and Interaction Mechanisms in Jingdezhen Ceramic Production: Visual Analysis of the Qianlong-Era Tao Ye Tu," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 12, no. 2002 (2025): 1-2, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06273-x.

[25] 陈浏（寂园叟）·《陶雅》（清宣统二年［1910］刊本）· 卷上 · 第 3–7 页。转引自 Rose Kerr and Nigel Wood, *Science and Civilisation in China: Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Vol. 5, Part 12: Ceramic Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 130.



Figure 7 *Illustrations of Porcelain Manufacture* (Qianlong Period, 1753), depicting the sequential 18-step production workflow in Jingdezhe (Part II: Steps 7–12): (7) Manufacturing closed forms; (8) Collecting ore for blue colour; (9) Selecting blue pigments; (10) Moulding the body and grinding enamel; (11) Painting round ware in blue; (12) Fashioning and painting of closed forms. *(Source: Tang Ying, 1753).*

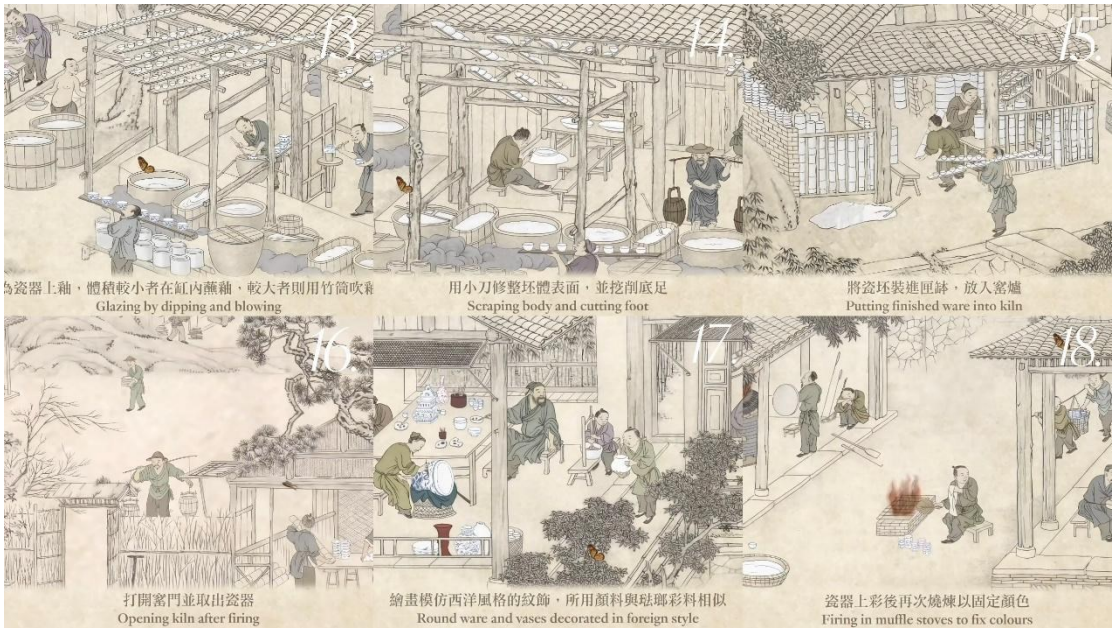


Figure 8 *Illustrations of Porcelain Manufacture* (Qianlong Period, 1753), depicting the sequential 18-step production workflow in Jingdezhe (Part III: Steps 13–18): (13) Glazing by dipping and blowing; (14) Scraping body and cutting foot; (15) Putting finished ware into kiln; (16) Opening kiln after firing; (17) Round ware and vases decorated in foreign style; (18) Firing in muffle stoves to fix colours. *(Source: Tang Ying, 1753).*

The formal recognition of this system has come in stages. China first listed traditional

Jingdezhen handcraft porcelain techniques in the national intangible cultural heritage inventory in 2006. Then, on July 25, 2026, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee inscribed the "Jingdezhen Handicraft Porcelain Industry Sites" on the World Heritage List during its 48th session in Busan, South Korea. This inscription makes it China's 61st World Heritage Site and, notably, the country's first nomination framed as industrial heritage.[26] It also fills a long-standing gap on the World Heritage List for porcelain-themed heritage.

3.2 Strategic Narrative

The porcelain fragments and kiln remain found in Jingdezhen show what was made. But the city's ceramic tradition did not sustain itself through objects alone. It sustained itself through transmission. One generation showed the next how to throw a vase or fire a kiln, but also told them who had taught the craft before, and why it mattered (figure 9). Those stories kept the tradition alive alongside the skills themselves—a dynamic that deeply shaped how ceramic knowledge was passed down in Jingdezhen.



Figure 9 Master artisan Fu Changmin guiding her daughter Chen Pan in delicate ceramic painting, showing the family transmission of traditional craft in Jingdezhen. (Source: Jingdezhen Ceramic Heritage Archives.)

In Jingdezhen, a master teaches with more than techniques. When an apprentice learns to pull a vase or fire a kiln, they also learn who taught the master, and why the work matters beyond the workshop.

Zhu Zhenggui, a municipal-level inheritor of the traditional sagger-making technique, learned his craft in the 1960s. At that time there were no professional schools to speak of just apprenticeship, hands-on, inside the kiln factory itself. His master, Chen

[26] Xinhua Headlines: Jingdezhen Handicraft Porcelain Industry Sites inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage." *China.org.cn*. July 25, 2026. http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2026-07/25/content_118617603.shtml.

Jianzhang, taught him everything, breaking with the old guild rule that skills should stay within the family.[27] That break was an act of transmission. By choosing to teach an outsider, Chen Jianzhang passed on a value: the craft belonged to anyone who would learn it well. These oral traditions themselves convey a set of value judgments about artisans: who is worthy of this trade, and what qualities deserve respect. Researchers have interviewed ceramic inheritors and local practitioners. They found that a master isn't just teaching a set of steps. Along the way, they're passing down a whole sense of what "good work" looks like. What are sloppy counts or fine ones and what's worth the extra hour?[28]

The two most frequently repeated concepts are “millennium-old porcelain capital” (*qiannian cidu*) and “kiln fire never extinguished” (*yaohuo bu xi*). When the Jingdezhen Handicraft Porcelain Industry Sites were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, media coverage almost uniformly repeated these two phrases. State media reported that Jingdezhen has “over 2,000 years of pottery-making history, over 1,000 years of official kiln history, and over 600 years of imperial kiln history.” The expression of “millennium” and “unceasing” emphasizes an unbroken continuity. The city appears as a place where the craft never stopped. While the emphasis on continuity remains, the tradition has also evolved through recent changes.

Over the past two or three decades, outsiders have arrived in Jingdezhen in large numbers. Locals call them Jingpiao — people who've moved here, from cities in China or from abroad, to work in ceramics. Incomplete statistics put the number at over 70,000 now living and working in the city. Most of them are young: more than 85 percent are under thirty-five.[29] Among them are an estimated 5,000 foreign nationals, sometimes called yang Jingpiao (figure 10).[30] The old pattern still runs on masters, apprentices, and the generations that follow them. That system has not disappeared, but over recent decades, outsiders have started stepping into the same chain. Many of them came as independent practitioners who learned elsewhere or taught themselves. The old chain now carries new links along the old ones.

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[27] Zhang Jing, “景德镇非遗代表性传承人口述史记录（七）：与泥土窑火相伴的半世纪——朱正贵” [“Oral History of Jingdezhen’s Representative Intangible Cultural Heritage Bearers (7): Half a Century Accompanied by Clay and Kiln Fire—Zhu Zhenggui”], 大江新闻, June 4, 2026, https://m.jxnews.com.cn/jxjdz/system/2026/06/04/031153817.shtml.

[28] “器物、生产与在地性：口述叙事下的景德镇陶瓷艺术研究” [Objects, Production and Locality: A Study of Jingdezhen Ceramic Art through Oral Narrative], 艺术设计学刊 [Journal of Art and Design], no. 12 (2025). **“Qiwu, Shengchan yu Zaidi Xing: Koushu Xushi xia de Jingdezhen Taoci Yishu Yanjiu”** [Objects, Production and Locality: A Study of Jingdezhen Ceramic Art through Oral Narrative], *Yishu Sheji Xuekan* [Journal of Art and Design], no. 12 (2025).

[29] “深度调查 | ‘漂’在景德镇：在泥巴里寻找理想生活” [In-depth Investigation: “Drifting” in Jingdezhen—Searching for an Ideal Life in Clay], *WeChat*, 29 January 2026. The article states that Jingdezhen currently attracts over 70,000 Jingpiao, of whom more than 85% are under 35. **“Shendu Diaocha | ‘Piao’ zai Jingdezhen: zai Niba li Xunzhao Lixiang Shenghuo”** [In-depth Investigation: “Drifting” in Jingdezhen—Searching for an Ideal Life in Clay], *WeChat*, 29 January 2026.

[30] Wang Dan, “Global Artists Finding Home in ‘Millennium Porcelain Capital’,” People's Daily (English edition), June 4, 2026, http://en.people.cn/n3/2026/0604/c90000-20463619.html.



Figure 10 International residency artists and local craftsmen participating in the Taoxichuan Cultural and Creative Market in Jingdezhen, illustrating the contemporary "Jingpiao" (Jingdezhen drifters) phenomenon and global craft exchange. (Source: Taoxichuan Art Center / Jingdezhen International Studio Archives, 2023.)

In 2026, People's Daily described Jingdezhen as a "magnet attracting artists from around the world."[31] Foreign Jingpiao, the report suggested, come to learn from local potters. Many rent studio spaces and produce their own work. In this process, they also spread Jingdezhen's ceramic culture to people who might not otherwise expose it. Take the French artist Kaimei.Her work brings together elements of French and Chinese culture. The article sums this up as “innovation through the preservation and transmission of tradition” and also “connecting with the world through openness and inclusiveness.”[32] The traditional teaching methods are still there, and they still matter, but now new people are joining in and becoming part of that story too.

3.3 Collective Memory and Patterned Internalisation in jingdezhen

A story told by one master to one apprentice, over time, becomes a story told by many masters to many apprentices.

The stories of Jingdezhen's craft have been repeated for so long, by so many people, that they've stopped feeling like stories. They feel like facts of life. Nobody designs it. It just settles in after enough repetition. Talk to enough craftspeople here and certain phrases keep turning up. Lineage matters, precision matters. Clay and fire deserve some kind of respect. Nobody argues about any of this anymore. It's just how people talk.[33]

Stories also stick to places. Tell a story in the same spot often enough, year after year,

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[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] On the patterned nature of cultural memory and its operation below conscious awareness, see James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially the discussion of schematic narrative templates.

and the story starts attaching itself to that spot. A visit to the old kiln site or a workshop that has been running for decades brings that attachment into the present. People stand in a location where memory has settled. One study of Jingdezhen's old factory area calls it a "living space for the transmission of traditional craftsmanship," where intergenerational memory sustains the identity of the craft.[34]

Language carries this memory just as physical space does. “Millennium-old porcelain capital” packs a couple thousand years into four words. Nobody has to explain what those years contain. It compresses a long history into a shorthand and offers a shared expression that anyone can use, regardless of education or background. The phrase has become a shortcut for a longer story about continuity, craftsmanship, and cultural significance.[35] Repeated often enough, across many settings, it settles into the background. People repeat it without thinking about where it came from. It just becomes part of how the city talks about itself.

These smooth, shared shorthands can make heritage feel stable, but collective memory relies on the people who lived it. As the first and second generations of state-owned ceramic factory workers grow old, their personal experiences are not easily captured by those shorthands. The 2025–2026 oral history project in Jingdezhen, "Jingdezhen: Old Artisans and New Jingpiao," has interviewed 125 key participants and accumulated more than 260 hours of recordings since its launch in March 2025.[36] The project's director calls the work a "race against time." as the physical practices and living bearers of these memories naturally diminish. Through these recordings, the project converts fragile oral recollections into a permanent archival record for the city.

3.4 Cultural Identity and Belonging

Jingdezhen porcelain has appeared in places far from the Yangtze River valley—in Southeast Asian courts, in European cabinets. These wares traveled diplomatic and trade routes.

Jingdezhen porcelain accompanied Chinese diplomatic missions abroad for centuries. During Zheng He's voyages in the early fifteenth century, imperial blue-and-white wares were presented as gifts to rulers across Southeast Asia and East Africa.[37] These objects travelled as trade goods and as diplomatic gifts. For the Chinese court, they also served as symbols of imperial presence along the maritime routes. The British

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[34] Xu Wang, “手工制瓷的记忆与价值——以景德镇老厂为例” [“Memory and Value in Handmade Porcelain Production: A Case Study of Laochang, Jingdezhen”], 中国陶瓷工业 [*China Ceramic Industry*], April 1, 2025, https://qkzzs.jcu.edu.cn/zgtcgy/info/1025/4498.htm.

[35] On linguistic shorthand and its role in memory, see Cesar Lopez, Floor van Alphen, and Laura Carmona, “Narratives and Collective Memory,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 65 (2025): 102087, on how condensed expressions evoke entire narratives without requiring full articulation.

[36] Wu Nan, “Yu Shijian Saipao, Wei Wenming Dang'an” [Race Against Time, Archive for Civilization], Chinese Social Sciences Net, January 28, 2026, https://www.cssn.cn/skgz/bwyc/202601/t20260128_5971009.shtml.

[37] Cynthia von Bogendorf Rupprath, "For Sultans, Grand Dukes and German Princes: Chinese Porcelain as Diplomatic Gift in the 15th and 16th Century," *Asian Ceramics* (Princessehof National Museum of Ceramics, 2021).

Museum’s collection includes a number of such pieces from this period (Figures 11 and 12).



Figure 11

Pair of blue-and-white flasks with dragon motifs, Ming dynasty, Yongle and Xuande periods (1403–1435), Sir Percival David Collection, British Museum. (Source: Photo by the author, British Museum, London.)



Figure 12

Display cases housing an extensive collection of Ming porcelain (16th–17th century), Sir Percival David Collection, British Museum. *(Source: Photo by the author, British Museum, London.)*

A field study on the identity construction of intangible cultural heritage bearers in Jingdezhen found that practitioners of handcrafted porcelain derive their sense of self from two interconnected sources.[38] One is the work of their own hands. A potter who has spent years at the wheel knows the clay in a way that cannot be learned from books. Mastering traditional techniques gives artisans direct pride in their work. It establishes their reputation within the workshop and the wider community. This is an achievement earned through daily physical labor—the kind of knowledge that lives in the fingers. The other source extends beyond the individual. Artisans also see themselves as part of a larger story. They carry a craft that has passed through generations, and they will pass it on to the next. This sense of cultural responsibility gives their labor a purpose that goes beyond making a living. The two are not separate—they feed into each other. Potters who take pride in technique teach it carefully. They keep working at the wheel between classes. The same sense of belonging that keeps practitioners teaching also keeps institutions investing in heritage protection and training. Each generation finds its own reasons to participate.

4. Traditional Comb Craftsmanship as Benchmark

4.1Historical Facts and Material Remains

Wooden comb craftsmanship is one of China's oldest continuously practised handcrafts. Early physical survivals date back thousands of years into the Neolithic period, exemplified by the intricate openwork ivory comb with spiral motifs excavated from the Dawenkou site ca. 4500 BP (figure 13).[39] Combs have been part of Chinese daily life for millennia. Regional comb-making traditions developed over time, each with its own techniques and local style. The craft peaked during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when the imperial court started selecting the finest pieces for palace use—wares that became known as "palace combs" (gongshu).[40]

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[38] Zhelin Zhang, Xiaohe Zhou, and Yunyao Zhang, "Handmade Porcelain in Jingdezhen: Identity Construction and Cultural Identity in the Context of Intangible Cultural Heritage, China," *International Journal of Religion* 5, no. 11 (2024): 8251–8260, https://doi.org/10.61707/cvpnt406.

[39] “镂雕旋纹象牙梳” [“Openwork Ivory Comb with Spiral Motif”], 中国国家博物馆 [National Museum of China] https://www.chnmuseum.cn/zp/zpml/kgfjp/202008/t20200824_247245.shtml

[40] Jing County People’s Government, “榔桥木梳制作技艺（省级非遗项目）” [“Langqiao Wooden Comb-Making Craftsmanship (Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Project)”], April 9, 2024, https://www.ahjx.gov.cn/News/show/1561444.html.



Figure 13
Neolithic ivory comb with openwork spiral motif (ca. 4,500 BP), excavated from the Dawenkou site in 1959 and preserved in the National Museum of China. (Source: National Museum of China Archives.)

People have used combs every day for thousands of years. They pulled them through their hair in the morning, tucked them into pockets and replaced them when a tooth broke. A few fine combs were used in in palaces, but most were made for ordinary use. When Anhui Province added wooden comb craftsmanship to its intangible heritage list in 2014, the designation recognized the people who still made those combs.

4.2Strategic Narrative

Acceptance into the palace changed the comb's status. The court sent officials to select specific workshops for imperial supply, and those workshops were then treated differently by the market. A comb that had been deemed fit for the emperor gained a reputation the moment it left the palace gates. Its value came from its entry into the palace. No marking or inscription was required to make clear that. Among ordinary buyers, the term “palace comb” (gongshu) carried weight beyond the quality of the carving—it signaled a standard that had been tested by the highest authority in the land.

The comb also appears in wedding rituals. In many parts of China, in the Song dynasty, Meng Yuanlao's Dongjing Meng Hua Lu records a wedding custom called hejì. On the wedding night, the bride and groom each cut a small lock of hair and bound the two together, a gesture meant to tie their lives into one. Both families were expected to bring

silk, hairpins and a wooden comb as gifts.[41] The comb was not placed on display. Its purpose was practical and was part of the ritual.

Health and longevity gave the comb a role in well-being. In traditional Chinese medicine, as recorded in the *Huangdi Neijing*, daily combing was recommended to stimulate blood circulation and delay greying.[42] A comb given to an older relative became a wish. The gesture said something that words alone could not: that the person receiving it might live longer, stay healthier, keep their hair dark for a few more years. These meanings—court selection, ritual use, health advice—accumulated across different contexts. The wooden comb elevates its material function in much the same way as Jingdezhen porcelain, though on a different scale. Both crafts depend on cultural associations to give a physical item weight beyond its utility. Porcelain draws its status from civilisation and national glory. The comb builds its meaning through daily life—in a wedding night ritual, in a quiet wish for an elder's health, or in a small gift carried close to the body.

4.3 Collective Memory and Patterned Internalisation in comb

A mother combing her daughter's hair is not an event that gets recorded. It happens in the morning, before school, in front of a mirror. Or a husband combs his wife's hair after she has been sick. These actions happen repeatedly, in no particular order, and leave no trace in writing. A child who grows up with this gesture does not need to learn what a comb is for. The object enters her life through daily touch—the quiet weight of a hand, the pull against a tangle. Long before the craft receives an official label, the tool has already entered in human memory as captured in early records of hair-combing routine (Figure14).

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[41]孟元老，《东京梦华录》，卷五，"娶妇"条： "凡娶妇，男女对拜毕，就床，男左女右，留少头发，二家出匹段、钗子、木梳、头须之类，谓之合髻"

Meng Yuanlao, *Dongjing Meng Hua Lu* [Dreams of Splendor of the Eastern Capital], juan 5, "Marriage" section: "In all weddings, after the bride and groom bow to each other and go to the bed, the man on the left and the woman on the right, a small lock of hair is kept from each. Both families provide silk, hairpins, a wooden comb, and hair ornaments — these items are used for the rite called hejì [binding the hair]." Translation mine. For the annotated edition, see Yi Yongwen 伊永文, ed., *Dongjing Meng Hua Lu Jian Zhu* 東京夢華錄箋注 [Annotated Dongjing Meng Hua Lu] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2006).

[42] *Huangdi Neijing* (Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), “Suwen,” which identifies the head as the meeting point of all *yang* meridians, establishing the classical rationale for daily combing as a health practice.



Figure 14

Historical photograph of a daily hair-combing scene in a domestic setting (Late Qing Dynasty, ca. 1870s–1880s). (Source: Wellcome Collection Archives.)

The memory of the wooden comb also lives among the people who make them. In Qing-dynasty Changzhou, comb-making workshops were concentrated near the western and southern city gates. One local gazetteer records that "men and women of the western part of the city mostly work in this trade."[43] Another Qing source notes that "every household within the Chaijing Gate makes bamboo combs."[44] Several tens of thousands of people were engaged in comb production around Changzhou at the time,

[43] *Guangxu Wujin Yanghu Xianzhi* [Guangxu Gazetteer of Wujin and Yanghu Counties], "Tuchan" [Local Products], which records: "Combs and fine-toothed combs: men and women of the western part of the city mostly work in this trade." Cited in "Bai Xiang Shu Bi: Gong Shu Ming Bi 'Po Jian Cheng Die'" [White Elephant Combs: Palace Combs and Famous Bi Breaking Out of the Cocoon], *Our Jiangsu*, July 19, 2020.

[44] *Changzhou Fu* [Rhapsody on Changzhou], Qianlong reign (1736–1795), which states: "Cutting bamboo to make fine-toothed combs, every household within the Chaijing Gate does this." Cited in "Changzhou Shu Bi" [Changzhou Combs and Fine-Toothed Combs], Jiangsu Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, December 17, 2013.

and most passed the craft from one generation to the next. Repeated across generations and among families, this pattern gradually transformed individual practice into collective memory.

4.4 Cultural Identity and Belonging in comb

The wooden comb has outlived plastic alternatives and continues to sell in large numbers. In 2025, the global wooden comb market was valued at approximately 968 million dollars, with China accounting for a substantial share.[45]The market is projected to grow at an annual rate of over 5 percent through the early 2030s.[46] Cheaper alternatives exist. Demand for this product continues to grow steadily. Research on intangible-heritage consumption describes young buyers as purchasing something like the time value and aesthetic scarcity attached to an object, as much as the physical object. People might pay a few extra yuan for a wooden comb when a plastic one costs less. The wood feels warmer, smoother at the edges after months of use. That difference is about what the object carries into daily life. A comb that someone chose with care shows a preference for a slower, more natural lifestyle.

Among the people who make combs, both pride and worry tend to exist. A complete comb takes around eighteen separate steps, from cutting the wood to shaping each individual tooth. Few people can do all of them well.[47] Xu Liren has been making combs in Dongyang for over fifty years. He can do all eighteen from memory. His hands know the weight of each tool. Most people who try the trade could not reach that point. But this source of pride also brings with it a quiet unease. Fewer and fewer people are mastering this craft. They learn one or two steps, then leave for factory work or city jobs. The skills each artisan possesses are difficult to pass on. The real challenge is in the hand-finishing and the decorative work that each piece requires (figure 15).

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[45] Global Wooden Combs Market size was projected at USD 968.64 Million in 2025. See “Global Wooden Combs Industry Trends Analysis Report 2025, Forecast to 2033,” MarketResearch.com, March 19, 2026.

[46] The market is expected to grow at a CAGR of 5.52% from 2025 to 2033. See “Global Wooden Combs Industry Trends Analysis Report 2025.”

[47] "Bringing a National Patent to Handmade Wooden Combs" [让手工制作的木梳拥有国家专利], China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum (Zhongguo Feiwuzhi Wenhua Yichan Wang), accessed July 27, 2026, https://www.ihchina.cn/news_1_details/11321.html.



Figure 15 Close-up of a master artisan performing intricate hand-painting on a traditional wooden comb. (Source: China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum Archives.)

This craft survives since it continues to serve different people in different ways. For the maker, comb-making develops skill and a sense of craft through years of repetition. A comb enters users' daily routine and carries meanings accumulated over time. Both acts, repeated over time, made the craft part of ordinary life.

5.Shadow Puppets

5.1Material Craft and Performing Art: The Dual Nature of Shadow Puppets

Chinese shadow puppetry is a form of theatre. It also known as "shadow play" or "lamp shadow play." Coloured figures made from leather or paper are performed to live music and singing. Puppeteers stand behind a screen and control the figures using wooden rods. Light is projected through the translucent cloth, casting moving images on the other side. Many veteran performers know a large number of traditional plays by heart. Some stories lived on through speech, others in writing. It brings together traditional craft, opera, and literature into a single art form. This makes shadow puppetry one of the more layered forms of Chinese folk.[48]

The origin of shadow play can be traced back to the Han dynasty. The Book of Han records the Emperor Wu missed his deceased Consort Li. A sorcerer named Li Shaoweng made an image of Consort Li out of cotton and silk. He performed it under a lamp. Emperor Wu watched it from a distance. This story is often seen as an early origin of shadow play.[49]Shadow play had already seen some development in the Tang dynasty. Yuan Zhen's poem "Dengying" (Lamp Shadows) describes how people performed the story of Emperor Xuanzong and Consort Yang using a form resembling shadow play.[50]By the Song period, the system of shadow play had become quite well

[48] "皮影戏" [Shadow Puppetry], China Intangible Cultural Heritage (*Zhongguo Feiwuzhi Wenhua Yichan Wang* 中国非物质文化遗产网), https://www.ihchina.cn/.

[49] Ban Gu, *Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1962), juan 97, "Waiqi zhuan," 3951. The story is later cited in Gao Cheng, *Shiwu jiyuan*, juan 9, as an origin of shadow play.

[50] Yuan Zhen, "Dengying" [Lamp Shadows], in *Quan Tang shi* [Complete Tang Poems], juan 412. The poem

established. Shadow play spread to different parts of China. It adapted to local habits and audiences' preferences. Gradually, it blended with regional dialects and folk traditions.[51] These adaptations gave rise to distinct regional traditions that still define the art today. Northern styles, like those from Tangshan and Tianjin city, developed rich vocal traditions influenced by local *bangzi* opera. In the west, the figures look plain at first look. But they are carved with great care. The music often uses Daoqing or old folk tunes. In the south, the figures are bigger and look more like real people. Zhejiang's Haining and Guangdong's Lufeng are good examples. So the same art form took on very different looks across the country.[52]

Shadow puppets are not made the same way everywhere. The materials change from region to region, and so do the techniques. Donkey skin is common in the north. It is treated until it becomes flat and semi-transparent. That quality makes it easy for craftsmen to carve lines and open-cut facial features. Northern puppets look delicate and detailed. Figure 16 shows a typical northern puppet, with its finely carved lines and open-cut facial features. Western styles use cowhide instead. Western puppets look heavier and less translucent in Figure 17. In the central and southern parts of China, the style is simpler. As shown in Figure 18, puppets are not heavily carved. They rely more on colour painting. The head is separate from the hat. The limbs are fixed to the body. These basic materials and structural choices determine how freely each part can move on stage.

reads: “Luoyang zhouye wu chema, man gua hongsha man shutou. Jian shuo ping shi dengying li, Xuanzong qian ban Taizhen you” (洛阳昼夜无车马，漫挂红纱满树头。见说平时灯影里，玄宗潜伴太真游). The last two lines are often cited as evidence of shadow play performances during the Tang dynasty.

[51] Wei Liqun, *Zhongguo piyingxi shi* [History of Chinese Shadow Play] (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2007), 89.

[52] Wei Liqun, *Zhongguo piyingxi shi* [History of Chinese Shadow Play] (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2007), 102–110.



Figure 16
Representative regional styles and structural elements of Chinese shadow puppets:Northern style (e.g., Tangshan/Luanzhou), featuring intricate line-carving and vibrant theatrical costumes(Source: Compiled by the author based on traditional regional puppet forms from late Qing to 20th-century artistic lineages.)



Figure 17
Shaanxi/Northwestern style, showing bold facial profiles and traditional headwear (*toumao*)



Figure 18
Southern/Folk style comic character figure with articulated limbs.

While people often explain these regional differences through visual style, the deeper difference is the material. Existing work on Chinese shadow puppetry has focused mainly on carving styles and regional colour schemes. The puppet appears primarily as a decorative object, valued for what it shows more than what it does. This approach explains geographic diversity in visual appearance. It gives relatively little consideration to the physical properties of the hide itself. Those properties, its flexibility, weight, and grain they shape what the puppet can do on stage.

Puppet makers in Hebei and the northeast use donkey hide. Getting it ready takes several steps: soaking, scraping, drying, repeated until the hide turns thin and clear.[53] Since traditional shadow puppetry is performed with a light source placed behind a translucent screen. This high degree of clarity is essential. A thin hide lets that light through cleanly. It also produces sharper outlines and brighter colours on the

[53] China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network. “Piyinxi (Beijing piyingxi)” [Shadow Puppetry (Beijing Shadow Puppetry)]. Accessed August, 2026. https://www.ihchina.cn/project_details/13405.

projection screen. In western and Southern regions, Puppet makers in these areas tend to use cowhide or water buffalo hide. [54]They are tough and thick. These materials are less translucent than donkey hide. But western shadow play repertoires include many large-scale scenes and complex parts. During suspension and frequent swinging these oversized puppets have to bear their own weight and the push-and-pull forces from control rods. The high stiffness of cowhide prevents unexpected deformation during big movement, so the image on the screen stays clear. Lower translucency is traded for structural strength, directly serving the demands of large-scale staging and continuous movement. The material choice matches what the performance actually needs.

Material choice favors performance over decoration. Their properties determine how the puppet operates within a system of light, movement, and manual manipulation. Therefore, puppet making begins with the practical requirements of performance. Decorative work comes later in the production process.

This art form operates between object and performance, and the two rely on each other for expression to happen. Both are constrained by the same physical reality. Material does not determine everything—but it sets the limits. Within those limits, improvisation, creativity, and expression take place. What makes shadow puppetry unique is that it exists in both states, constantly shifting between them. When the light's off, it is an object. It is a crafted leather surface with carving and paint. After the light goes on, it becomes a show. The material doesn't just sit between the two states as a barrier. It is the exact physical medium that allows the static object to turn into a dynamic performance.

5.2Oral Storytelling and Folk Dramas

Dynasties in China rose and fell for thousands of years. Each one left behind its own stories, countless heroic legends and myths. Since ancient times, the Chinese have loved listening to stories. Most people already knew how the story ended. That never seemed to matter much. A story doesn't need to be new to pull someone in. The tense parts still grab people, even after many viewings. And shadow puppetry happened to be the one form that told these familiar stories well

Shadow puppetry has been passed down for thousands of years in China. Behind the screen sat only a light source and a handful of carved figures. It worked by one person's hands and voice (figure 19). That's the whole setup without ornate sets or a large company. Shadow puppetry told stories about everyone—emperors, soldiers, and also the gods and ghosts lurking just beyond what people could see.

[54] "Chinese Shadow Play – Precursor of Modern Cinema." China Daily, March 24, 2009. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/life/2009-03/24/content_11691473.htm.



Figure 19

veteran shadow puppeteer manipulating figures behind the lit screen during a live performance. (Source: Feature report material on regional Intangible Cultural Heritage inheritors, China Cultural News Archives.)

Among all the stories, those about the rise and fall of civilizations and the exploits of heroes are very popular. The Yuan-Ming poet Qu You wrote a poem describing a shadow play performance inside a Song-dynasty pleasure quarter: candles fill the hall, and the story on the screen moves through the rise and fall of dynasties. By the time the play reaches the Wujiang River, the audience is still calling him a hero, still calling him a king.[55]These shows told historical moments like Xiang Yu's defeat at Wujiang.This tradition of telling historical stories continued well into the Ming dynasty. Pieces like *The Battle of Chu and Han* and *Three Fights with Lü Bu* were performed regularly. Shadow puppetry had matured into a more developed form in the Song dynasty. Nai Deweng's *Duchengjisheng* describes performances already running in Hangzhou's

[55] Qu You 瞿佑, "Kandeng Ci" 看灯词 [Watching the Lanterns], in *Shicang Lidai Shixuan* 石仓历代诗选 [Selected Poems from the Stone Granary Through the Ages], compiled by Cao Xuequan 曹学佺, juan 362 (Ming dynasty). "南瓦新开影戏场，满堂明烛照兴亡。看看弄到乌江渡，犹把英雄说霸王。" ["A new shadow-play stage has opened in the southern quarter. Candles fill the hall, lighting up one dynasty's rise and another's fall. As the story reaches the crossing at Wujiang, they still call him a hero, still call him a king."] Translation mine.

pleasure quarters: puppets first cut from plain paper, later shaped from dyed hide.[56]Fan Chengda, writing during the Southern Song, mentioned the same thing from Suzhou city. His poem "Lantern Market" names shadow-lantern plays as one of the things locals loved most during the Lantern Festival.[57] Shadow puppetry was no longer a marginal form of entertainment. It had become part of daily entertainment for ordinary city dwellers. Yet the transmission of these stories depended on more than having a repertoire. The performers had to piece the story back together every time they staged it.

With just one skilled shadow puppet artist and a simple set of puppets, it's possible to create the momentum of a vast army. One person plays every role. A general gets a rough, growl. Young scholars' voices are gentler, softer. A clown just sounds funny, and made to get a laugh. None of these voices come from different people. They all come out of the same throat, but seconds apart. Music and puppet control happen at the same time. Behind the screen, the performer works thin rods to move the puppet's limbs, keeping every gesture in time with the story. Then there are the props. A puppet may set down a teacup or raise a stone. Using a prop takes a different kind of handling. Prepare the prop rod, then quickly extend thumb and index finger to send the prop to the designated spot.[58] These techniques could be learned through repeated practice, but they were hardly ever written down. Performance traditions in some regions placed focus on oral transmission and the performer's ability to rebbuild the story during performance.

Many shadow puppeteers in different regions perform without a fixed script. Hehuang shadow puppetry, in particular, has few written scripts. Performances rely on oral transmission from one generation of artists to the next. Most of them can improvise on the spot. They do not use written texts like *yingjuan* (script scrolls), and they do not even need to rehearse before a show. They are still able to put on high-quality performances.[59]Southern Hebei shadow puppetry similarly relies on oral transmission. No written scripts exist, even extended plays are passed down by rote.[60]In the Jianghan Plain, practitioners call this kind of skeletal script *tiaoshu* like a writing outline. One practitioner explained:" the performer naturally unfolds the plot based on historical

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[56] Nai Deweng 耐得翁, *Ducheng Jisheng* 都城纪胜 [A Record of the Splendors of the Capital City] (1235), "Washa Zhongji" 瓦舍众伎 section. "凡影戏乃京师人初以素纸雕镞，后用彩色装皮为之。" ["All shadow plays: performers in the capital first carved figures from plain paper, and later switched to dyed hide, decorated in color."] Translation mine.

[57] Fan Chengda 范成大, "Dengshi Xing" 灯市行 [Lantern Market], in *Lawei Cuntian Yuefu Shishou* 腊月村田乐府十首 [Ten Ballads of the Twelfth-Month Countryside]. "吴台今古繁华地，偏爱元宵灯影戏。" ["This ancient terrace of Wu has always been a place of splendor, and its people have always loved shadow-lantern plays at the Lantern Festival."] Translation mine.

[58] "Zhongguo piyingxi" [Chinese Shadow Play], *Xuexi Yuekan* [Study Monthly], no. 9 (2023).

[59] "Piyingxi (Hehuang piyingxi)" [Shadow Puppetry (Hehuang Shadow Puppetry)]. Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan wang [China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network]. https://www.ihchina.cn/project_details/13418/.

[60] Wang Haijun, and Dong Li. "Zoujin Ji'nan piyingxi" [Approaching Southern Hebei Shadow Puppetry]. *Handan Wanbao* [Handan Evening News], October 24, 2016. http://szb.handannews.com.cn/new_epaper/hdwb/html/2016-10/24/content_145085.htm.

accounts."[61]

Oral transmission and improvisation are central to storytelling in many regional traditions. But the way they interact with written scripts differs from place to place. Studies on *yingjuan* (script scrolls) in Hebei shadow puppetry classify these performance texts into three types: scriptless plays, outline-based plays, and full-script plays.[62]The first two forms, dominant in practice, are a testament to the folk principle of 'art residing in the person' (yi zai renshen). They remind us that the narrative's true locus shifts from the page to the living interaction between performers and audience. Any analysis of such performances, therefore, must take into account the dramatic effects and improvisational elements generated among the performers themselves.[63]

A written text is stable. Once a story is fixed on the page, it remains the same for every reader. Fidelity is the standard to the original and author's intention. Shadow puppetry does not work this way. Its narrative is regenerated in each performance. The same play, *The Battle of Chu and Han*, differs from one night to the next, from one show to the next. Lines are adjusted on the spot. Details shift with the mood of the room. The story stays recognizable, but the experience does not repeat. Scholars of oral tradition have examined it in other contexts. Zhao Zongfu, in his analysis of Hehuang shadow puppetry, observes that the performers' creative presentation is always a form of formulaic cultural transmission. They assemble narrative patterns and various "phrases" of different scales to produce a large number of shadow plays."[64]This suggests that performer memorize a set of flexible narrative units, not fixed sentences. Specific scenes call for specific musical modes, characters matched to vocal tones—these formulas are learned through oral instruction and memorisation. They are reactivated in each performance.

5.3 Collective Memory

Shadow puppetry became an urban public entertainment in the Song dynasty. Cities grew richer, which brought many public entertainment spots. In Bianjing, the Northern Song capital, shadow puppetry already had fixed performance spaces within the *washe* and *goulan*.*Washe* (瓦舍), also called *wazi* (瓦子) or *washi* (瓦市), were commercial entertainment districts in cities during the Song and Yuan dynasties.Inside

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[61] Wuhan Shangxueyuan [Wuhan Business University]. "'Yingzhao Chuyun' jiemi Jianghan Pingyuan piyingxi de qianshi jinsheng" [Shadow Illuminates the Charm of Chu: Uncovering the Past and Present of Jianghan Plain Shadow Puppetry]. July 28, 2024. https://www.wbu.edu.cn/2024/0728/c2192a75778/page.htm.

[62] Ning Keqiang 宁克强. "Dui Hebei sheng yingxi yingjuan meixue de xitong chanshi" 对河北省影戏影卷美学的系统阐释 [A Systematic Interpretation of the Aesthetics of Shadow Play Scripts in Hebei Province]. *Zhonghua Dushu Bao* [China Reading Weekly], March 23, 2022. http://epaper.gmw.cn/zhdsb/html/2022-03/23/nw.D110000zhdsb_20220323_2-10.htm.

[63] Song Wei 宋薇. *Ji piyingxi yingjuan meixue sixiang yanjiu* 冀皮影戏影卷美学思想研究 [A Study of the Aesthetic Thought of Shadow Play Scripts in Hebei]. Baoding: Hebei University Press, 2021.

[64] Zhao Zongfu 赵宗福. "Lun Hehuang piyingxi zhanyan zhong de koutou chengshi" 论河湟皮影戏展演中的口头程式 [On the Oral Formula in the Performance of Hehuang Shadow Puppetry]. *Wenyi Yanjiu* 文艺研究 [Literature & Art Studies], no. 4 (2000): 98–106.

these districts were fixed performance venues called *goulan* (勾栏).[65] In the Southern Song, shadow puppetry also entered temple grounds,mostly for festivals that welcomed the gods. These performances were tied to religious occasions: birthdays of deities and communal rites. After the Ming dynasty, the old *washe* and *goulan* declined quickly and eventually disappeared. Shadow puppetry had to find new places to perform. Some found work in private mansions—performing at banquets, or kept on salary by nobles. Others moved away from the commercial streets and into village life. During the Ming and Qing, shadow puppetry became a regular feature at rural temple fairs and festival celebrations—a tradition that continues in some regions today (Figure 20).



Figure 20
Shadow puppetry performance at a temple fair. (Source: China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum.)

It was part of everyday life for ordinary folk.[66]Apart from the big communal rituals and the downtime between harvests, regular families also started putting on shadow plays in their own homes. They did it for banquets, for the birth of a child, or to pay back a vow to the gods. Meanwhile, in urban areas, during the late Qing, shadow shows were also in tea houses and restaurants.[67]As shadow puppetry found its way into villages and private homes, it also became part of festival calendar. The Lantern Festival, in

[65] Wu Zimu 吴自牧. *Mengliang lu* 梦粱录 [Dream Records]. 2 vols. Beijing: Zhongguo Shangye Chubanshe, 2023.

[66] Li Yuezhong 李跃忠. "Lun Zhongguo yingxi de shengcun fangshi ji qi bianqian" 论中国影戏的生存方式及其变迁 [On the Survival Modes of Chinese Shadow Play and Their Changes]. *Minzu Yishu* 民族艺术 [Ethnic Arts Quarterly], no. 1 (2007): 68–74.

[67] Zhang Dongcai 张冬菜. "Dongbei Manzu diqu piyingxi de ge'an kaocha — Xiuyan piyingxi yanjiu" 东北满族地区皮影戏的个案考察——岫岩皮影戏研究 [A Case Study of Shadow Puppetry in the Manchu Region of Northeast China: Research on Xiuyan Shadow Puppetry]. *Zhongguo Minsu Xue Wang* 中国民俗学网 [Chinese Folklore Network], March 25, 2009. https://www.chinesefolklore.org.cn.

particular, was a major occasion for performances. A Song-dynasty poem, *Dengshi Xing* (Song of the Lantern Market), describes the lively scene of the festival: every household hung out lanterns, streets were filled with people. It was on such festive occasions that shadow puppetry frequently appeared. The festival was a collective, ritualised event. When shadow puppetry was performed on this day, it was bound up with reunion and communal festivity. Where shadow puppetry was performed changed a lot over the centuries. The social setting of a performance affected what kind of experience could be shared and remembered by its audience.

Accompanying these spatial changes are the distinctive features of the content of shadow puppet plays. Shadow puppetry doesn't try to recreate a full timeline of events. It picks a handful of moments, the ones carrying real emotional weight. The whole performance gets built around those moments. Take the Chu-Han contention. Official histories cover years of troop movements and shifting alliances, Shadow performances boil it down to a few key scenes. Such as Xiang Yu's suicide at the Wujiang River. Xiang Yu could have crossed the river and lived. A boatman was waiting there to take him across. He refused, choosing to fight and die on the spot instead of running from a war he'd already lost. The audience never learns the exact date of the battle. Nobody counts soldiers on each side. They're left with a mix of emotion of admiration and sorrow for a man who chose death over survival, admiration for a man who wouldn't abandon his own defeat, sorrow that someone with his strength ended up cornered at a river with no way out except to die well. What the audience remembers is no longer the political outcome of the Chu-Han struggle instead they could keep the grandeur of a hero's downfall and the dignity of a noble defeat in mind. People across dynasties share similar feelings. People admire heroes. They regret failure and lament the unpredictability of lif. Hans Robert Jauss argued that a work only becomes complete once an audience brings their own experience to it — performance supplies a shape, and the viewer fills that shape with feelings that are entirely their own.[68] A Song dynasty city dweller, or a Ming villager, likely brought their own frustrations and setbacks to what they were watching. So the stories on stage connected with what people already felt in their own lives. Shadow puppetry's historical scenes work as collective memory because they tell history, also the stories of people. Research on Dingtao shadow puppetry finds that the art plays a role in “activating and sustaining” that memory—especially against the backdrop of rural collective memory fading in modern times.[69]

Across all these changing venues, shadow puppetry performed a consistent function: it brought people together, shared a story with them. In that process, it produced and sustained collective memory—about history, heroes, and values like loyalty, courage. The space became a temporary ground for collective experience. Those spaces let

[68] **J**auss, Hans Robert. “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory.” Translated by Elizabeth Benzinger. *New Literary History* 2, no. 1 (1970): 7–37.

[69] Zhang Yue 张月. “Dingtao piyingxi dui Luxinan diqu xiangcun jiti jiyi de chonggou yanjiu” 定陶皮影戏对鲁西南地区乡村集体记忆的重构研究 [A Study on the Reconstruction of Rural Collective Memory in Southwest Shandong by Dingtao Shadow Puppetry]. *Xiju Zhijia* 戏剧之家 [Home of Drama], no. 25 (2025): 49–51.

people share an experience together. And stories carried emotional patterns that connected individual feelings to a larger historical imagination. Over time, through the space and story working together, shadow puppetry converted remote historical events into collective images and affective memories that could be recalled at any moment.

5.4 identity in shadow puppetry

Shadow puppetry was visually accessible to anyone in the audience, but its aural dimension was far more selective. The carving style might travel and the stories might be recognizably the same. But the singing, the accents, the rhythmic patterns of the accompaniment—these remained local. Audiences in temples or village squares heard these sounds and recognised them.

Scholars of sound have long argued that auditory experience creates social boundaries. R. Murray Schafer, in his theory of the "soundscape," called a "soundmark": a sound that is unique and specially noticed by a community, giving its acoustic environment a distinct identity.[70] Marshall McLuhan extended this line of thinking with the concept of "acoustic space" to describe a mode of perception different from visual space. While visual space is defined by physical boundaries, acoustic space is immersive and enveloping, capable of immediately involving individuals in collective interaction.[71] Scholars such as Tan Sooi Beng and Nancy Rao also have written about"Sino-soundscapes" Their research looks at how Chinese communities recreate a sense of musical presence through everyday performance sound — opera, street theatre, festival music.[72] A dialect carries through the singing, a particular vocal style comes out.It establishes a distinct acoustic territory. Familiarity with the dialect and vocal style determined whether a listener was drawn into the performance or left outside the auditory experience, following only the moving images on the screen.

This auditory boundary and the sense of belonging created by dialect and vocal manifest in shadow puppet scripts across different regions of China. Huaxian shadow puppetry in Shaanxi, also known as Huaju or Wanwanqiang, is one of the oldest shadow puppet traditions in the world. It uses the local Guanzhong dialect of Weinan and retains many dialectal features in its singing.[73] The signature "wanwanqiang" vocal style is characterised by the use of hardwood bowls and copper bells as percussion instruments.[74]The sound is high-pitched and delicate.It is filled with folk colloquialisms and inverted syntax unique to Guanzhong.When the performer sings local sayings,such as *"da wan chi mian, kan re nao"* (eating noodles from a big bowl while watching a

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[70] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994), 7–12.

[71] Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 74. See also McLuhan's 1969 interview in *Playboy Magazine*, in which he describes acoustic space as having "no center and no margin."

[72] Tan Sooi Beng and Nancy Yunhwa Rao, "Introduction—Emergent Sino-Soundscapes: Musical Pasts, Transnationalism and Multiple Identities," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 25, no. 1 (2016): 4–13.

[73] "Varying Discourse and Use of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Shaanxi Huaxian Shadow Puppets," *China Perspectives* 2022, no. 4 (2022): 39–48, https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.14601.

[74] Shaanxi Provincial People's Government, "Shaanxi Shadow Play," *Discover Shaanxi*, June 6, 2022, https://en.shaanxi.gov.cn/as/hac/ch/202206/t20220606_2223630.html

lively show),[75] outsiders may not catch the humour. But local Guanzhong villagers could get it instantly, and the whole audience laughs together. The same auditory logic applies to Tangshan shadow puppetry. Performers use the strong Jidong dialect (Laoting dialect) throughout the show.[76]A distinctive feature of Tangshan shadow puppetry is the artist's ability to improvise spoken lines (*jiabai*) in the Laoting dialect, adapting to the atmosphere of the night's performance.[77]At rural temple fairs, veteran performers often weave local folk anecdote into traditional repertoire with the humorous rhythm of the Jidong dialect. Locals from the village and neighboring areas pick up on the inside jokes instantly. Based on the Laoting dialect and village relationships, this auditory experience makes a traditional performance into an expression of regional identity.

The soundscape of shadow puppetry is not a neutral backdrop. Each performance sets up a cultural threshold through voice and dialect. Entry requires lived memory of the community built from years of hearing its distinct rhythms in village markets and local temples. For local audiences, it serves as a source of identity and belonging, whereas for outsiders, it marks a sense of unfamiliarity. Through these localized voices, shadow puppetry has sustained its emotional resonance across generations and persists as an active cultural practice. This practice preserves past traditions and reaffirms and performs community identity continually. In this way, shadow puppetry remains a living medium that sustains collective memory across generations.

6. Embroidery

6.1Materiality and Medium

To look at embroidery is not to watch a performance. There is no light passing through a screen, no moving figure operated by rods. What you see is a still image, made of thread and cloth. Shadow puppetry produces meaning through dynamic performance. Material presence in embroidery is built on the physical connections between thread, stitch, and fabric. An image could carry cultural narratives, but the viewing experience derives first from the material—not from external light or the intervention of movement. The material holds the pattern; it also shapes what the final image looks like. Embroidery shows how material shapes the viewing experience through its physical properties, and how that experience influences the construction of cultural meaning.

Embroidery takes a pattern and transfers it onto cloth. The way a needle enters the cloth, the direction each thread takes, and the tension across the fabric all shift how the materials relate to each other. These changes accumulate and shape the final look of the

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[75] Zhisan Wang, *Research on Shaanxi Local Opera and Guanzhong Dialect Culture* [Shanxi difang xiqu yu Guanzhong fangyan wenhua yanjiu] (Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press, 2015), 88–92.
[76] Pen Chen Fan, *The Performance and Context of Tangshan Shadow Puppetry* (Taipei: Ritual Theatre Press, 2007), 45.
[77] Liqun Wei 魏力群, *History of Chinese Shadow Theatre* [Zhongguo piying yishushi] (Beijing: Cultural Art Press, 2007), 184–188.

piece. The making does not force a pre-existing design onto the material. It works with the material's properties, adjusting as it goes. Tim Ingold suggests this process as making. He argues that materials are not static. Their qualities are not fully set before the work begins. They unfold through the continuous engagement between the maker and the material.[78]In embroidery, the pattern matters, but its presentation is largely conditioned by the material interplay of thread, fabric, and stitch.

Embroidery is a practice of continuously adjusting bodily movements in response to the material. Richard Sennett argues that craft skills develop through the craftsman's ongoing perception of and response to material resistance. Manual skill does not exist independently of the material, it develops through long-term practice, as a coordination between body and material.[79]In embroidery, factors such as thread tension and the subtle changes that occur when the needle passes through the fabric require constant adjustment through experience. This is not abstract knowledge accumulated over time. It is an embodied practice, shaped by the material's responses. Embroidery's visual effect cannot be reduced to its pattern. Unlike painting, which achieves its effect by applying pigment to a flat surface, embroidery rearranges threads with each stitch, producing new physical structures on the fabric. Rozsika Parker describes embroidery as a tactile practice whose meaning is inseparable from material interaction during making.[80]These effects operate on the lustre of the silk and the surface topography built by stitching.

Embroidery's materiality resides initially in how the silk threads look—the optical effect they create. That effect comes from the material, not the pattern. Suzhou embroidery has long been considered one of the finest examples of Chinese embroidery through its fine imagery, and also through a making process that fully utilises the physical properties of the silk. High-grade Suzhou embroidery typically uses very fine threads. A standard silk thread can be split into 1/16, 1/32, or even 1/64 of its original width(Figure 21).Through repeated splitting, the thread diameter is further reduced, allowing more precise stitch control and colour transitions.[81]This technique is often seen as a way to improve realism.Thread splitting works primarily on the material level.By reducing the thread's diameter, it changes the way light interacts with each fibre—how it reflects, and scatters.These change shape the visual outcome independently of the pattern itself.

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78 Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), chap. 2.
79 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 119–130.
80 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984).
81 Sun Peilan 孙佩兰. *Suzhou cixiu shi* 苏州刺绣史 [A History of Suzhou Embroidery]. Suzhou: Suzhou University Press, 2015. See chapter on thread preparation and splitting techniques.

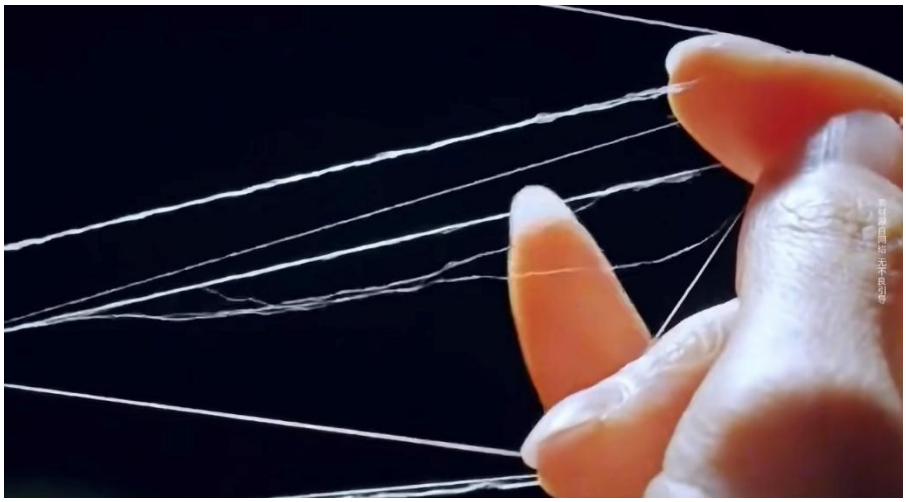


Figure 21

Close-up of an artisan performing the traditional thread-splitting technique in Suzhou embroidery, separating silk threads into fine strands.(Source: Feature report material on Suzhou embroidery craftsmanship, China Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Museum.)

Silk has a natural lustre not added through dyeing or finishing. As textile research has documented, silk fibroin has a relatively high refractive index and a hierarchical fibre structure. When light enters the fibre, it is reflected and scattered both on the surface and inside the fibre. This produces a directional lustre.[82]Lustre is produced by light interacting continuously with the material. The same colour thread, stitched in different directions, yields subtle variations in brightness. Thread splitting in embroidery further amplifies this material property. As the silk thread is separated into finer strands, each fibre covers less of the fabric surface, and the density of stitches increases. Numerous fine threads intersect in different directions, creating more continuous variations in light reflection across the fabric surface. Distinct colour boundaries might become gentler transitions. The resulting visual depth draws on colour combination, it also depends on an arrangement of silk fibres which changes how light travels (Figure 22).

[82] Cansi 蚕丝 [Silk]. In *Nongye da cidian* 农业大词典 [Dictionary of Agriculture]. Beijing: China Agriculture Press, 1998.



Figure 22

Details of Suzhou embroidery exhibits displaying varying silk lustre, stitch directions, and surface topographies across different subjects.(Source: Suzhou Grand Canal Museum Archives; compiled by the author.)

The viewing experience of embroidery cannot be fully reproduced through a flat image. Digital photography can capture pattern, colour, and composition with reasonable accuracy, it cannot show the shifting lustre of silk as the viewing angle changes. The embroidered image always exists under the combined influence of material and light. An embroidered piece does not offer the same view from every position. The image shifts with the viewer. Visual experience here is situated perception.

6.2 Narrative construction

Viewers of traditional Chinese embroidery encounter birds, flowers, and figures that usually appear in fixed combinations. Viewers could recognise these motifs through the arrangement and spatial positioning of elements within the composition. Unlike shadow puppetry, which unfold over time through action and sound, embroidery presents a static image. Through standardised combinations of motifs, embroidery compresses social ideas into fabric—ideas that would need language or performance to be expressed in other forms. For Panofsky, the interpretation of images cannot rest on what is immediately visible. Meaning is produced through the cultural framework in which the image is embedded.[83] When viewers see birds, rocks, or flowers in embroidery, they are also putting those elements back together in their own way. Barthes understood the image as a system that generates meaning, reorganising cultural experience in the act of viewing —meaning is not fixed in the object.[84]The crane, the lotus, and the pomegranate carry familiar associations. But shared understanding of these motifs

[83] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939 repr, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1972), 3–31). See also Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), especially chapters 1 and 2 on the three levels of iconographical interpretation.
[84] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 32–51.

depends on the conventional combinations that have developed between them over time. Repeated across history, such combinations become legible to viewers without any need for text.

In Chinese clothing and ritual spaces, the link between image and meaning becomes tangible. Craig Clunas's research on Ming material culture has shown that objects participate in the construction of social order through practices of viewing and use.[85]Embroidery motifs, displayed and worn over time, turned ideas about status and good fortune into stable visual patterns. Patterns that remain recognisable across regions and eras depend on viewing habits formed through long-term social practice. Among the rank badges (buzi) on Ming and Qing official robes, their primary function was to identify the wearer's official rank, as exemplified by a fourth-rank civil official's badge featuring a pair of cloud geese in couched gold thread (Figure 23). After the Hongwu twenty-fourth year (1391) regulations established that civil officials use birds and military officials use beasts, the badge designs became standardised.



Figure 23
Qing dynasty fourth-rank civil official's rank badge (buzi), featuring a pair of cloud geese (yunyan) embroidered in couched gold thread. (Source: Collection of China National Silk Museum Archives.)

The composition had settled into three clear layers in the Qing dynasty: the bird or beast for the rank sat in the middle, a sun and clouds above, and the sea-and-cliffs motif below.[86]This layout structured the viewer's gaze. Viewing usually starts at the centre. After identifying the bird and confirming the rank, the eye follows the bird's gaze to the sun disc, then down to the rocks and waves. Studies on Qing rank badges indicate that the sun disc symbolises the emperor, while the bird or beast is always oriented towards

[85] Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). See also Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

[86] *Ming Shi* 明史 [History of Ming]. Compiled by Zhang Tingyu 张廷玉 et al. 1739. See juan 67, "Yufu zhi" 舆服志 [Treatise on Carriages and Robes].

it. The waves and cliffs together form a ritualised representation of the universe.[87] The bird shows the official's rank, and its position relative to the sun, clouds, and landscape sets that rank within the order of ruler-subject and heaven-earth. Viewers could see a highly structured political and cosmic system.

Rank badges followed strict official regulations. Folk embroidery, by contrast, inhabited weddings, birthdays, and other everyday events. But the logic of the images didn't change with the occasion. Even when there was no uniform standard, embroiderers from different places still chose very similar patterns. In the "Hundred Children" motif commonly found in folk embroidery.the children are rarely presented in isolation (Figure24). The visual centre is usually a group of playing children or children holding lotus flowers, connected by gardens, pomegranates, and ruyi scepters into a scene.[88] These elements compress societal expectations of continuing the family line and family's prosperity into a limited space on the canvas.



Figure 24
"Hundred Children" (*Baizi Tu*) embroidered silk panel on a yellow ground (Qing Dynasty).
(Source: Compiled by the author from historical textile archives.)

The "Hundred Children" motif had a story behind it. King Wen of Zhou was said to have a hundred sons—an auspicious sign recorded in the Book of Songs.Over time, it came to signify many offspring and family prosperity. Other auspicious motifs worked the same way. Individual symbols had their own associations, but the full meaning came from fixed combinations. Lotus with fish meant "may you have plenty every year." Bats with peaches meant long life. Pomegranates with children reinforced the hope for many sons and grandsons.[89] If these motifs were taken apart, each would still carry its own

[87] On the iconography of Qing rank badges, see "Qingdai buzi wen yang de dingzhi ji wanshan" 清代补子纹样的定制及完善 [The Customisation and Perfection of Qing Rank Badge Patterns], *Donghua Daxue Xuebao (Shehui Kexue Ban)* 东华大学学报(社会科学版) [Journal of Donghua University (Social Science Edition)], no. 1 (2008)

[88] *Cixiu baizitu*" 刺绣百子图 [Embroidered Hundred Children Design]. *Minzu Yishu* 民族艺术 [Ethnic Arts], no. 4 (2019).

[89] Wang Shucun 王树村, ed., *Zhongguo jixiang tu jicheng* 中国吉祥图集成 [A Collection of Chinese Auspicious Motifs] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), see sections on "liannian youyu" (连年有余), "duozi duofu" (多子多福), and "fushou" (福寿).

cultural association. But they would not form a coherent narrative on their own.

Official rank badges, the Hundred Children motif, and everyday auspicious patterns belonged to very different social contexts. But they shared a similar logic of visual organisation. People encountered these patterns frequently in daily life. Through repeated acts of seeing and using, they learned to read what they saw. Over time, the stability of pattern placement and people's continued recognition of these combinations persisted. Cultural meaning was also gradually consolidated through this long, everyday practice of looking.

These visual forms rarely required textual explanation. The image did not generate meaning on its own. It worked through a stable compositional order that guided the viewer's eye. Then, through repeated combinations of patterns, it led the viewer towards shared cultural knowledge. The cultural meanings carried by embroidery did not remain tied to individual objects. Through repeated community viewing, they became part of everyday memory.

6.3 remembering as practice

Embroidery carries visual experience and the cultural significance through its patterned arrangemen. Visual recognition alone is not enough to ensure that these meanings endure. for the fabric wears out, and the physical lifespan of any single piece is limited. But the patterns, the stitches do not disappear along with the fabric. Paul Connerton introduced the concept of "incorporated practice" to explain how social memory persists beyond written texts and historical narratives.[90] The body holds onto past experience through motions repeated over and over. A skill can pass from one generation to the next this way.

Embroidery manuals usually document stitch names and pattern compositions. The pressure applied and the speed of the needle depend on muscle memory developed through long-term repetition of the same motions. Pulling thread evenly, knowing how much pressure to use, picking the right colors — none of these come from reading about it. Grace S. Fong describes that women's embroidery in late imperial China as a "knowledge field" that encompasses specialized skill training, aesthetic judgment, and cultural refinement.[91] Through this bodily practice, women produced physical textiles while generating and transmitting cultural knowledge in the same act.

In the early 19th century, Ding Pei of the Qing dynasty authored the Xiu Pu (Manual of Embroidery).She established six categories: "Selection of Setting," "Choice of Patterns," "Material Sourcing," "Color Discrimination," "Workmanship Evaluation," and "Quality Appraisal."and systematically reviewed the whole process of embroidery.[92]

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[90] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

[91] Grace S. Fong, "Female Hands: Embroidery as a Knowledge Field in Women's Everyday Life in Late Imperial and Early Republican China," *Late Imperial China* 25, no. 1 (2004): 1–58.

[92] Ding Pei 丁佩, *Xupu* 绣谱 [Manual of Embroidery] (1821; repr., Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985).

As Grace S. Fong analyzes, *Xupu* textualizes the practical procedures of embroidery alongside its evaluative criteria, bringing embroidery into an artistic discourse open to discussion and critique.[93]Embroidery, once transmitted only through experience, now had its own written vocabulary. Embroidery was no longer confined to the private sphere; it became a form of cultural knowledge that could be preserved and disseminated.

In traditional Chinese society, embroidery was long bound up with women's lived experience. Dorothy Ko's study of Ming-Qing female culture shows that the inner chambers were crucial for women to acquire knowledge, pursue the arts, and engage with their peers.[94]This insight challenges the conventional view of these spaces as closed private realms. Ko maintains that women in the Ming and Qing dynasties forged their own cultural expressions through poetry, painting, and other everyday crafts. Embroidery also served as a primary vehicle for women to acquire and systematize knowledge, and to transmit it across generations. Through the physical act of stitching, women created tangible objects; at the same time, this practice shaped their perceptions of beauty and the dynamics of household life.

Within the household, mothers and elder female kin taught by demonstration and word of mouth, conveying knowledge. Every learning experience brings new insights and adjustments. While young embroiderers carry on established traditions, they also rearrange patterns, colors, and techniques based on their own experiences. Grace S. Fong's research on female embroidery practice during the late Qing and early Republican periods demonstrates that contemporary texts and pedagogical efforts treated technical skill as part of women's cultural cultivation. Embroidery moved beyond the household, generating a shared body of knowledge sustained through women's social network.
An embroidered piece, after leaving its make, enters the realm of family relations and social exchange. A wedding garment, or a child's accessory retains its significance after completion. They would reappear at weddings, births, and family gatherings. As objects circulate · an individual's labour moves into a wider social network.The meaning of the embroidered piece becomes bound up with social relationships in this process. Its use and exchange connect the maker, the giver, and the receiver. For Paul Connerton, memory is not confined to active recall; it is equally sustained through habitual, repeated actions carried out in social life.[95]A wedding gown is worn at the ceremony, later stored, perhaps altered for another use, or passed down. Each time it moves, it connects someone new to the same piece of cloth—and to the people who held it before. The embroidered object stays in collective memory through this continued

[93] Fong, Grace S. "Writing, Embroidery, and the Construction of Female Worth: Ding Pei's *Xupu*." In *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, edited by Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, 264–296. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.
[94] Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 1–18, 187–220.
[95] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

circulation—between hands, across generations and through the rituals that call for its presence.

6.4 Embroidery and the Reconstruction of Cultural Identity

For women in the Ming and Qing, needlework was part of a proper education—but it also exceeded that role. Dorothy Ko's study of inner-chamber culture suggests that while women's lives were constrained by ritual norms, these same spaces also nurtured a relatively autonomous cultural world. Poetry, painting, and embroidery ran through women's daily lives. In these practices, women formed their own aesthetics and cultural identity. Embroidery moved from the private space into wider social networks as stitching techniques and design evaluation formed more formal standards. Women brought their own judgments to their craft and to their teaching, and recognition from their peers gave them a standing that extended beyond the household. Over time, the skills and preferences embedded in their work circulated through generations of women, accumulating into a shared cultural memory.

In Xiupu, Ding Pei used painting and calligraphy evaluation to embroidery, proposing four graded levels: competent, skillful, marvelous, and divine. She judged embroidery by its composition, colour, and iexpressive mood.[96] The establishment of these standards elevated women's needlework beyond household precision, giving it the character of artistic creation. As embroidery entered social discussions on art, it opened a path for women's identities—from unknown handcrafters into individual artists.

While maintaining their familial roles, accomplished embroiderers began to establish independent reputations through their work. In the late Qing period modern masters like Shen Shou became famous both for their art and for her work in embroidery education and the publication of instructional manuals. She also helped bring the craft into public cultural space. Her Xueyi Xiupu systematically organised techniques, colour usage, and sketching practices.[97] Where knowledge had once been passed down through direct instruction, it now became available as published material for a wider public. In the early twentieth century, schools and training programmes were established across China.These institutions developed embroidery into a form of skilled labour that could support women's employment and professional growth. While preserving the traditional techniques, this transition invested embroidery with new social functions and enabled more women to develop a clearer sense of agency through their work.

As embroidery styles settled into stable aesthetic forms across regions, they became markers of local identity. This identity was no longer limited to individual women or the domestic sphere. Needlework left the house, entered broader social networks and served as a way for local communities to build their own cultural identity.

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[96] Ding, Pei. *Xiupu* [Embroidery Manual]. 1821. Reprint, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985.

[97] Shen Shou and Zhang Jian, *Xuehuan Xiupu* [Xuehuan's Embroidery Manual] (1927; repr., Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian, 1994), 805–19.

Take Suzhou embroidery. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, the craft developed its visual language from Suzhou's thriving silk industry and its literati painting tradition. They nurtured a refined, elegant aesthetic associated with the Jiangnan region (Figures 25 and 26).



Figure 25
Heguang Lueying ("Shimmering Lotus") series by Yao Jianping.
(Source: China Intangible Cultural Heritage Official Websit)



Figure 26
Heguang Lueying ("Shimmering Lotus") series by Yao Jianping (Detail view).
(Source: Ibid.)

This environment gave Suzhou embroidery a stable visual language over time.[98] When people mention Suzhou embroidery, they think of a whole set of cultural associations—Jiangnan life, silk culture, and literati aesthetics. Local culture became concrete through embroidery,and through this medium it has continued to be visible and recognisable.Yue embroidery, which long served the open commercial environment and export trade of the Lingnan region, developed a more pronounced decorative style than Su embroidery's pursuit of delicate and subtle expression.Works from this region made extensive use of gold and silver threads, padding stitches, and other techniques, producing a strong three-dimensional effect and visual intensity. [99] This aesthetic choice responded both to the Lingnan tradition of favouring rich and brilliant colours, and to the demand for visibility at a distance and strong decorative effect in the maritime trade.

These regional traditions maintained distinct visual identity without becoming isolated from one another. In recent years, traditional needlework including Su, Yue, Xiang, and Shu embroidery has been inscribed on China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage list, bringing long-established regional techniques into broader public cultural space.[100]

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[98] Zhang Meifang, *Suxiu Yishi* [History of Su Embroidery Art] (Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Fine Arts Publishing House, 2012), 56–84.

[99] Chen Shaofang, *Yuexiu* [Yue Embroidery] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Education Publishing House, 2009), 33–71.

[100] State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Guowuyuan guanyu gongbu diyipi guojiaji feiwuzhi wenhua

Through museum display and public dissemination, these regionally distinct practices collectively form a comprehensive understanding of “Chinese embroidery.” Local characteristics have not disappeared under this shared national identity. Across different regions, embroidery takes distinct forms, and it is this diversity that makes Chinese embroidery a more complete and multi-dimensional cultural presence.

The Palace Museum contains over 130,000 embroidered textiles and garments, such as clothing, fabrics, furnishings, and embroidered pieces based on paintings and calligraphy.[101] Before they were brought into the museum, these items were worn, employed in rituals, or placed in domestic environments. After being taken out of those contexts, they became objects meant to be viewed rather than used. Viewing replaced use as the primary relationship between these textiles and their contemporary audience.

The museum has not removed the cultural identity that these fabrics once had. Through research, exhibitions, and digitization, the Palace Museum has taken the patterns and techniques originally seen on court costumes, interior furnishings, and embroidered scrolls and has presented them again in public cultural settings. Figure 27 shows a complete Qing-dragon robe—elaborately embroidered with twelve imperial symbols, each stitch encoding the wearer’s supreme status. The 2025 exhibition 'The way in patterns', jointly organized with the Suzhou Bay Digital Art Museum,[102] the curators took the traditional motifs from palace architecture, ceramics, and embroidered textiles and then rearranged them using immersive rendering and image-search tools. In this exhibition, visitors saw individual motifs lifted from their original contexts (Figure 28). The complete items—a Qing-dragon robe or a Song-dynasty embroidered scroll were absent from the display.

Extraction removes motifs from their original surfaces and from the hierarchical order they once embodied, then relocates them into a new framework. Motifs from different dynasties and ranks are all gathered there under a single label: "traditional Chinese patterns." The shift from court to museum changes what these motifs mean. Panofsky observed that an image's significance derives from its cultural setting. When the setting shifts from court hierarchy to national heritage, the same motifs acquire new associations.[103] A dragon or a rank badge once told a viewer about the owner's place in the imperial order. The original markers of social rank are thus re-read as resources for cultural belonging.

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yichan minglu de tongzhi" [Notice of the State Council on the announcement of the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list], June 20, 2006.

[101] The Palace Museum, *Gugong Keti: Embroidery and Textile Arts in the Qing Imperial Collection* (Beijing: Forbidden City Press, 2018), 112–25.

[102] The Palace Museum and Suzhou Bay Digital Art Museum, The way in patterns*: An Immersive Digital Exhibition* (Exhibition Booklet, Suzhou: Suzhou Publishing House, 2025), 18–35

[103] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939; repr., Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1972), 3–31.



Figure 27
Qing-dragon robe (yellow gauze embroidered with cloud dragons in gold thread), Qianlong period. Source: Palace Museum (Object No. 故 00041968)



Figure 28
Extracted dragon motif displayed in "The Way in Patterns: An Immersive Digital Exhibition." Source: The Palace Museum and Suzhou Bay Digital Art Museum, *The Way in Patterns: An Immersive Digital Exhibition* (Exhibition Booklet, Suzhou: Suzhou Publishing House, 2025), 18–35.

This reconfiguration affects how embroidery is perceived. A viewer no longer needs to identify the school—Suzhou or Beijing—or decode the rank system in a dragon robe. Attention falls on the texture of the embroidery. Sensory features signal Chinese craft without demanding historical knowledge. Freed from its original function, the motif becomes flexible—usable in new combinations, colours, media. Embroidery can enter contemporary aesthetic experience as an independent visual element.

When traditional craft enters a global design context, it often reveals a vitality that extends far beyond its place of origin. Dior's 2021 autumn/winter menswear collection used Suzhou's seed-stitch (dazi xiu) embroidery on pieces that also carried Kenny Scharf's street-influenced imagery. [104]This collection was produced in collaboration with a Chinese embroidery team. The seed-stitch technique, traditionally used for small-scale details, was applied across belts and jackets in this collection. The shift in scale demanded adjustments to thread colour and stitch density. The technique carries Kenny Scharf's bright colours and graphic shapes that differed sharply from the floral and bird motifs it had previously served. In accommodating these new conditions, the craft moved beyond its original ornamental function once a motif is detached from its original object, it can travel across contexts.

6.5 Reconnecting the Chain: From Material Practice to Cultural Identity

Placing embroidery with ceramics, comb-making, and shadow puppetry —differ in their materials and techniques, but each also raises the same set of questions: how does

[104] Dior, "Dior Men's Autumn-Winter 2021–2022 Collection in Collaboration with Kenny Scharf," Press Release and Craftsmanship Archives, Christian Dior Couture, 2020.

a tradition stay meaningful in people's daily lives, and how does it continue to shape cultural identity across generations? Placing these four practices in the same frame does more than test the general applicability of a theoretical chain—it illuminates the complementarity among different ICH media across narrative and sensory dimensions. Two of the cases—ceramics and combs set the wider frame while embroidery and shadow puppetry allow a more detailed examination of how the relationship works.

Materiality provides the point from which this process begins. Its significance lies in what people do with material forms rather than in the materials themselves. The examples discussed range from objects embedded in everyday life to practices that depend on performance and communal participation. Their forms make certain kinds of cultural experience possible, while the meanings attached to them develop through repeated use, representation, and transmission. Materiality in intangible cultural heritage cannot be understood simply as the physical remains of an earlier tradition. It provides the conditions through encountering and recognising a cultural practice.

The two benchmark cases were chosen because Jingdezhen porcelain and traditional combs operate at very different scales and belong to areas of cultural practice, yet both demonstrate that cultural meaning develops through the relationship between an object and the social life surrounding it. Jingdezhen makes visible a long history of production, labour, place, and cultural recognition, while the comb belongs much closer to everyday bodily experience and social custom. Their inclusion therefore extends the discussion beyond the two principal case studies. The argument developed through shadow puppetry and embroidery is not dependent on one particular artistic form. It can also be observed in objects whose meanings have been accumulated through long-term use and social transmission.

Narrative is where material experience turns from use into understanding. Use is repetitive, habitual—it does not require explanation. When narrative intervenes, the objects of use begin to carry meaning. They become things people talk about and pass on. The content and the scale may change but the operation remains consistent: communities se narrative to remember, interpret, and transmit the experiences. This also clarifies the relationship between the benchmark and deep cases. Jingdezhen and the traditional comb provide examples of how cultural meaning can accumulate around material objects over long periods of time. Shadow puppetry and embroidery make the narrative process more visible because their meanings are repeatedly produced through performance, visual representation, teaching, social use. The difference between them is therefore one of emphasis and in each case cultural heritage becomes meaningful through the ways people choose to remember and communicate particular aspects of its history.

These narratives are repeatedly circulated, they begin to enter collective memory. A story performed again and again, an object used within a familiar ritual, a pattern recognised as belonging to a particular region, or a craft practice transmitted between

generations gradually becomes part of what a community understands as its own cultural past. The process does not require every member of the community to possess the same knowledge. What matters is the existence of recognisable references that allow individual experiences to connect with a broader cultural background.

When that memory persists long enough and reaches enough people, it begins to shape identity formation. It forms through repeated sensory engagement—the visual precision of embroidery, the layered sound of shadow puppetry, the resistance of clay under pressure, the grain of wood against the palm. These experiences become habitual over time, and what starts as learned technique feels intuitive. Yet when practices are detached from their original social settings, that familiarity begins to erode. The challenge in whether they can be re-embedded into new contexts like museum spaces, design collaborations, digital platforms and everyday use. When younger audiences encounter these practices in ways that feel relevant to their own lives, heritage ceases to be inherited from the past and they actively choose to engage in. The chain that connects material practice to identity is not broken but extended.

7.Conclusion

This study demonstrates how intangible cultural heritage operates as a living narrative medium. Across the four cases examined, cultural meaning develops through the relationship between material practice, narrative, collective memory. These elements work together to generate cultural identity and belonging—at the individual level, within communities, and across the nation as a whole.

The benchmark studies show how the core logic operates across different scales, while the two primary cases allow its internal logic to be examined in greater detail. This does not mean the framework is universally transferable; its explanatory power lies instead in the relationships it traces between materials, narratives, collective memory, and the communities that sustain them. As these living heritage practices move through contemporary transformations—absorbing new practitioners, entering digital archives, or traveling across global markets—their original boundaries inevitably expand. I would argue that heritage survives not by resisting change, but by continually finding new ways to remain perceptible—so that people can touch it, hear it, see it, and follow it.

In developing this analysis, I focused on four cases with strong material and visual dimensions. Whether the same logic applies to oral traditions, purely ritual practices, or fully improvised performance forms remains an open question. As digital and mixed-reality technologies are transforming how cultural practices are perceived and remembered, it is also unclear whether these tools genuinely sustain narrative experience or merely simulate it while embodied engagement quietly slips away.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that the endurance of heritage depends neither on frozen preservation nor on institutional listing alone. It survives when material forms,

narratives, and collective memory continue to interact—sustaining the perceptual channels through which people recognize themselves in a larger cultural order. Heritage remains alive through continuing movements between inherited forms and present experience.

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