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(IJIREV)www.ijirev.comFROM RITUAL CRAFT TO DIGITAL SYMBOL: CULTURAL
TRANSFORMATION OF GUILIN PAPER-CUTTING (2006–2025)Guan Hong Yan^{1*}, Siti Shukhaila Shaharuddin², Tan Tse Guan³¹ Faculty of Creative Technology and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, Malaysia
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Abstract:

Guilin paper-cutting, a traditional Chinese folk art rich in symbolic and aesthetic value, is undergoing significant transformation in response to digital media, cultural policy, and changing modes of public participation. Although studies on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) highlight issues of preservation and innovation, limited research has examined how traditional crafts evolve across symbolic, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. This study analyzes the cultural transformation of Guilin paper-cutting from 2006 to 2025 through a Symbol–Emotion–Behavior framework. Using a systematic literature review of 72 sources and semi-structured interviews with practitioners, educators, and cultural workers, the research identifies three major shifts. First, symbolic expression has expanded from ritual motifs to diversified contemporary themes shaped by tourism, education, and youth culture. Second, emotional identification has broadened, as digital platforms foster new forms of engagement, particularly among younger audiences. Third, behavioral practices have evolved, with increased participation through school programs, online dissemination, and cross-industry collaboration. The study proposes a conceptual model of symbolic continuity, emotional resonance, and behavioral innovation, offering a structured understanding of how traditional crafts adapt in modern contexts. The findings contribute to ICH revitalization research and provide practical guidance for culturally sensitive innovation and sustainable transmission.

Keywords:

Guilin Paper-Cutting; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cultural Identity; Digital Communication; Emotional Resonance; Heritage Transmission

Introduction

Guilin paper-cutting is a distinctive form of Chinese folk art that embodies regional culture, landscape aesthetics, and collective memory. As part of China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH), it carries symbolic motifs and visual narratives that reflect local identity and traditional craftsmanship (Zhang, 2018; Li & Chen, 2020). However, over the past two decades, rapid social transformation, including digital media expansion, evolving cultural consumption habits, and national policy changes, has reshaped how traditional arts are practiced, disseminated, and perceived (Wang, 2021; Sun, 2019). Under these shifting cultural conditions, Guilin paper-cutting faces both opportunities for revival and challenges related to generational discontinuity, commercialization, and cultural authenticity.

Although previous scholarship has examined the artistic features, symbolic meanings, and regional styles of traditional paper-cutting (Liu, 2017; Huang, 2020), relatively limited research has explored how the craft transforms culturally in response to digital communication, youth participation, and tourism-driven innovation. Studies on ICH transmission often emphasize the need for preservation, yet they tend to overlook the dynamic processes through which traditional crafts adapt to contemporary aesthetic preferences, technological environments, and socio-economic pressures (Gao & Feng, 2022; UNESCO, 2020). There is therefore a need for a more integrated analytical approach that captures not only changes in visual symbolism but also shifts in emotional identification and behavioral practices surrounding the craft.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the cultural transformation of Guilin paper-cutting from 2006 to 2025 using a Symbol–Emotion–Behavior analytical framework drawn from cultural communication theory (Hall, 1997; Thompson, 2018). This framework provides a structured lens for understanding how symbolic forms evolve, how individuals and communities emotionally connect with cultural heritage, and how creative behavior manifests in both traditional and digital environments (refer to Figure 1). The study aims to identify transformations in symbolic meaning, examine changes in emotional resonance among practitioners and younger audiences, and analyze new behavioral patterns in creative practice, cultural learning, and market participation. Ultimately, this research develops a conceptual model that explains how traditional crafts can sustain cultural continuity while embracing innovative modes of expression in contemporary society.

This study focuses on Guilin paper-cutting as practiced within educational settings, community workshops, cultural institutions, and digital platforms. While the research draws upon systematic literature analysis and semi-structured interviews, it is limited by the absence of large-scale quantitative data. Nevertheless, the findings offer important insights into the evolving cultural ecology of traditional crafts and contribute to broader discussions on the revitalization and sustainable development of ICH in the digital age.

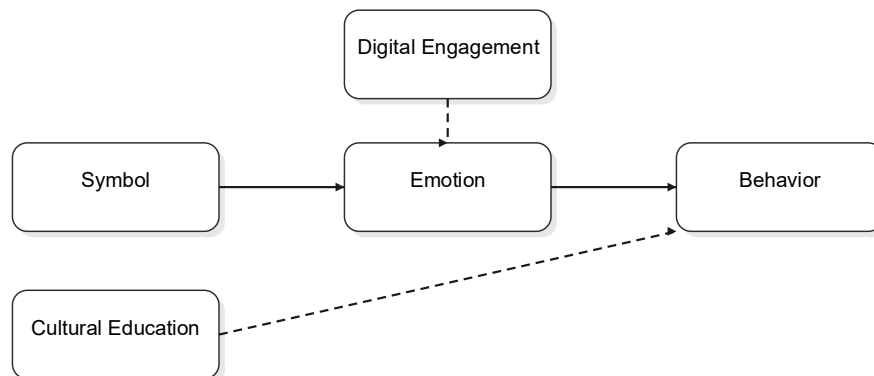


Figure 1: Solid Lines Indicate Direct Paths; Dashed Lines Indicate Indirect Paths. The Numerical Involvement Enhances the Impact Of “Symbol→Emotion”, And Cultural-Educational Exposure Enhances the Impact Of “Emotion→Behavior”.

Literature Review

Traditional Chinese Paper-Cutting and Cultural Symbolism

Chinese paper-cutting is widely regarded as a symbolic visual language that conveys cultural beliefs, ritual values, and regional identity (Wang & Li, 2019). Motifs such as plants, animals, and auspicious patterns are embedded with social meanings, functioning as a medium of storytelling and cultural transmission (Zhou, 2017; Chen & Xu, 2020). Guilin paper-cutting, in particular, is distinguished by motifs derived from the region’s iconic karst landscapes, ethnic culture, and local folklore, forming a strong regional aesthetic identity (Luo, 2018; Tan, 2021). Scholars emphasize that these symbolic forms serve not only decorative purposes but also express deep cultural narratives and collective memory.

Digital Transformation and Cultural Communication

The digitization of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has reshaped the ways in which traditional crafts are produced, consumed, and disseminated. Digital tools—such as mobile applications, AR filters, and short-video platforms—enable new modes of engagement that appeal to younger audiences (Huang & Zhang, 2022). Research shows that digital reproduction enhances accessibility and encourages hybrid styles that merge traditional craftsmanship with modern visual languages (Liu & Peng, 2020). User-generated content on platforms like Douyin or WeChat significantly accelerates the dissemination of Guilin paper-cutting, expanding its influence beyond local geographical boundaries (Li, 2022; UNESCO, 2020). However, scholars caution that digital diffusion may risk oversimplification or loss of cultural depth if not carefully guided (Yao, 2021).

Education, Transmission, and Community Participation

Educational institutions play an increasingly important role in the preservation and revitalization of ICH. Studies highlight that integrating traditional crafts into school curricula

enhances students' creative abilities while fostering cultural identity and heritage appreciation (Gao & Feng, 2022; Ma, 2021). Museums, cultural centers, and community organizations also contribute to sustaining the practice by providing workshops, exhibitions, and hands-on learning environments (Zhang & Wu, 2020). Nonetheless, scholars argue that sustainable transmission requires active participation from local communities and practitioners. Without community-led innovation and involvement, formal institutional efforts may become superficial or disconnected from lived cultural practices (He, 2023; Guo & Lin, 2019).

Cultural Industries, Tourism, and Creative Product Development

Guilin paper-cutting has become increasingly integrated into cultural tourism and creative industries, where it is used for merchandise design, branding, and cultural storytelling (Wang, 2020). Tourism-driven commercialization provides economic benefits and enhances visibility, but also raises concerns about cultural authenticity and symbolic dilution (Fan, 2021; Qin & Zhao, 2018). Scholars note that aesthetic adaptation must balance market appeal with the preservation of cultural meaning. The challenge lies in reinterpreting traditional patterns in ways that remain faithful to cultural heritage while meeting contemporary consumer expectations.

Symbol–Emotion–Behavior Framework for Cultural Transformation

To understand how traditional crafts evolve within modern contexts, recent studies adopt the Symbol–Emotion–Behavior (SEB) perspective as an analytical foundation. This framework posits that cultural transformation occurs through the dynamic interaction of three dimensions: (1) symbolic representation, (2) emotional resonance, and (3) user engagement or behavioral response (Hall, 1997; Thompson, 2018; Chen, 2021). Within this model, Guilin paper-cutting functions as both a visual symbol system and an emotional-cultural conduit that generates aesthetic pleasure, cultural identity, and social participation (Liang, 2022; Gao, 2021). The SEB framework is particularly relevant for examining how paper-cutting adapts to digital media, evolves within tourism industries, and continues to foster cultural connection across generations.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the cultural transformation of Guilin paper-cutting through the lens of the Symbol–Emotion–Behavior (SEB) framework. The methodology focused on documenting traditional practices, understanding digital adaptations, and analyzing how paper-cutting operates within contemporary educational and cultural contexts. The methods combined document analysis, visual analysis, and semi-structured practitioner interviews to ensure both cultural depth and interpretive rigor.

Research Design

A qualitative case-oriented approach was employed to capture the symbolic meanings, emotional functions, and behavioral impacts of Guilin paper-cutting. This design enabled the researcher to interpret cultural narratives and examine how traditional motifs evolve across physical and digital media. The SEB framework guided the inquiry by structuring data interpretation around 1) symbolic elements embedded in visual motifs, 2) emotional responses generated through aesthetic expression, and 3) behavioral outcomes related to participation, learning, and cultural dissemination.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, including experienced paper-cutting practitioners, art educators integrating the craft into their teaching, and designers involved in digital reinterpretations. Data collection involved three complementary strategies: visual documentation and analysis of traditional and contemporary paper-cutting works; a review of academic literature, cultural industry reports, museum publications, and digital media content to contextualize historical and modern developments; and semi-structured interviews with 4 cultural inheritors, 6 local teachers implementing ICH in school curricula, and 5 cultural workers and tourism practitioners to gather insights into symbolic interpretation, emotional significance, and evolving practices. Field observations were conducted in schools, cultural centers, and tourism markets in Guilin.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected from three complementary sources to enhance depth and contextual understanding:

Documentary and Visual Material

Traditional and contemporary paper-cutting works were documented through photographs, sketches, and digital screenshots. Archival materials, academic reports, museum publications, and digital-media content (e.g., Douyin videos, WeChat stickers) were included to trace stylistic evolution and symbolic reinterpretation.

Literature and Secondary Sources

Relevant literature from cultural heritage studies, design research, and educational theory was reviewed to situate the analysis within broader scholarly discussions. Sources included academic articles and conference papers, design journals and cultural industry reports, online retail descriptions and user feedback, and government and UNESCO documentation on intangible cultural heritage.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews with practitioners, educators, and designers (N = 6–10) were conducted to obtain insights into symbolic interpretation, emotional significance, challenges of preservation, and the impact of digital transformation. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Open-ended questions enabled flexible exploration of personal experiences, cultural perspectives, and design considerations.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis followed an interpretive thematic approach grounded in the SEB framework. The process proceeded through three stages:

Symbolic Coding

Visual motifs, color schemes, compositional structures, and narrative elements within Guilin paper-cutting were analyzed to identify recurring cultural symbols and their historical meanings. Coding categories were adapted from semiotic theory (Barthes, 1977), focusing on denotative and connotative layers.

Emotional and Aesthetic Interpretation

Interview transcripts and visual descriptions were examined to identify emotional values such as joy, nostalgia, cultural pride, and aesthetic resonance. These emotional themes were mapped onto symbolic expressions to understand how visual choices generate affective engagement.

Behavioral and Participatory Insights

Data related to user behavior involving learning participation, digital sharing, educational engagement, workshop involvement, and tourism consumption were analyzed to determine how paper-cutting influences actions and cultural continuity.

Data from multiple sources were compared and triangulated to ensure stable and meaningful thematic patterns.

Reliability and Ethical Considerations

To strengthen the reliability of interpretations, coding was reviewed by two independent researchers with experience in visual culture and Chinese folk art. Differences in interpretation were resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided verbal or written consent. All identifying information was anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Limitations of the Method

This study emphasizes cultural interpretation rather than quantitative measurement. While the qualitative design provides depth, it limits generalizability. The absence of large-scale surveys or eye-tracking reduces direct measurement of user behavior. However, this limitation is mitigated through triangulation across visual data, literature, practitioner insights, and contextual observation. Future research could incorporate mixed methods to further validate and extend the findings.

Findings

Literature Screening Process and Sample Characteristics

After systematic search and screening, a total of 50 articles were finally included in the analysis. Figure 2 shows the entire process of literature identification, screening, and inclusion based on the PRISMA 2020 criteria guidelines, strictly to ensure the transparency, replicability, and comprehensiveness of our literature search, selection, and synthesis procedures.

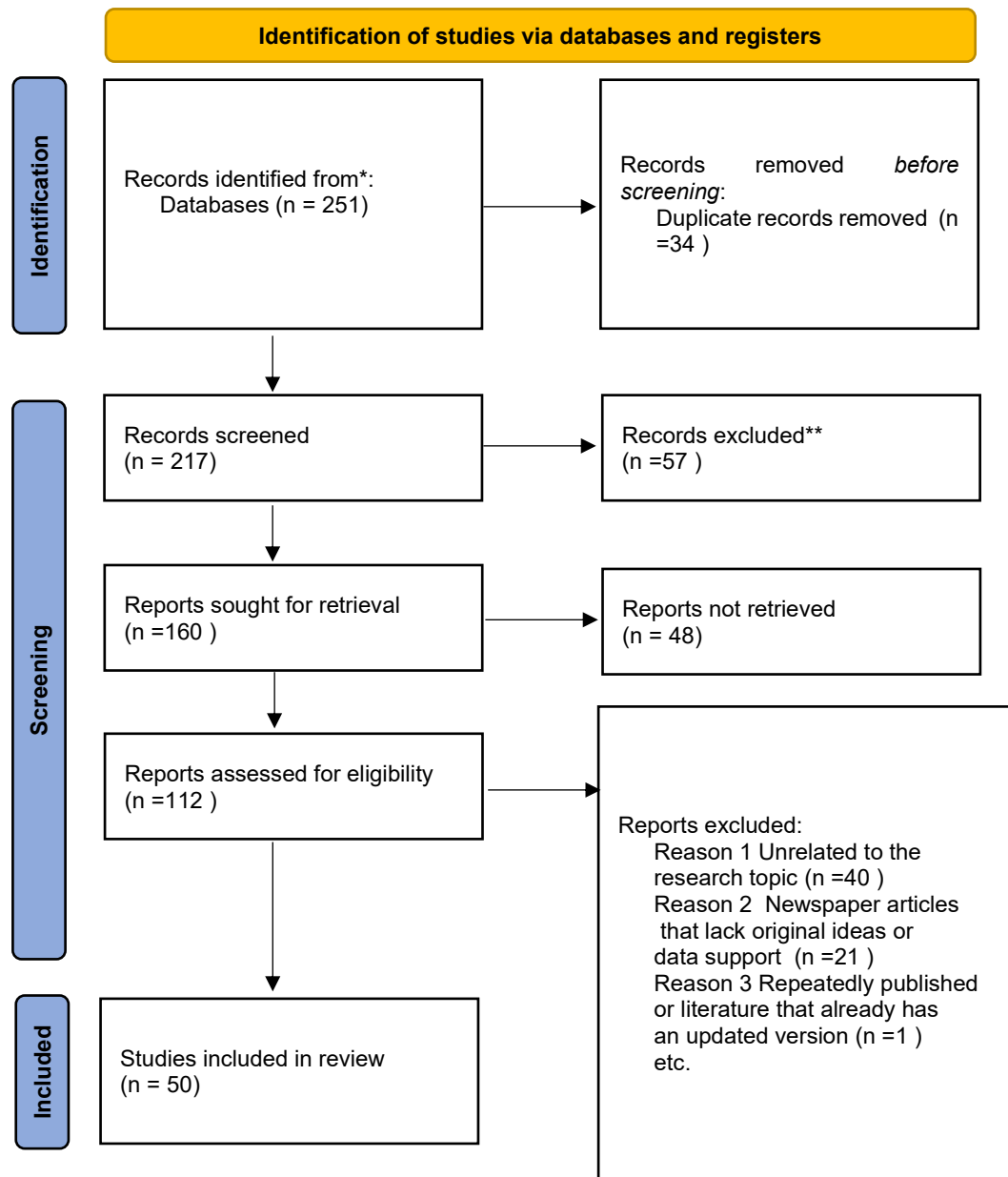


Figure 2: PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Screening and Selection Process.

The publication time span of the included literature is from 2006 to 2025. The distribution of the main data sources of the types is shown in Figure 3.

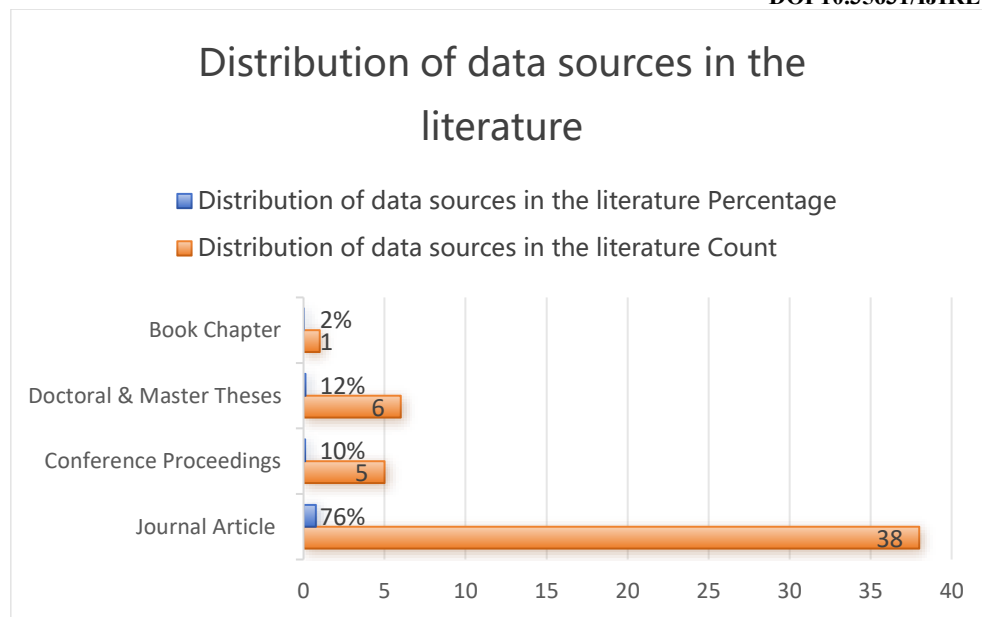


Figure 3 : Characteristics Of the Included Literature.

Core Topic Distribution

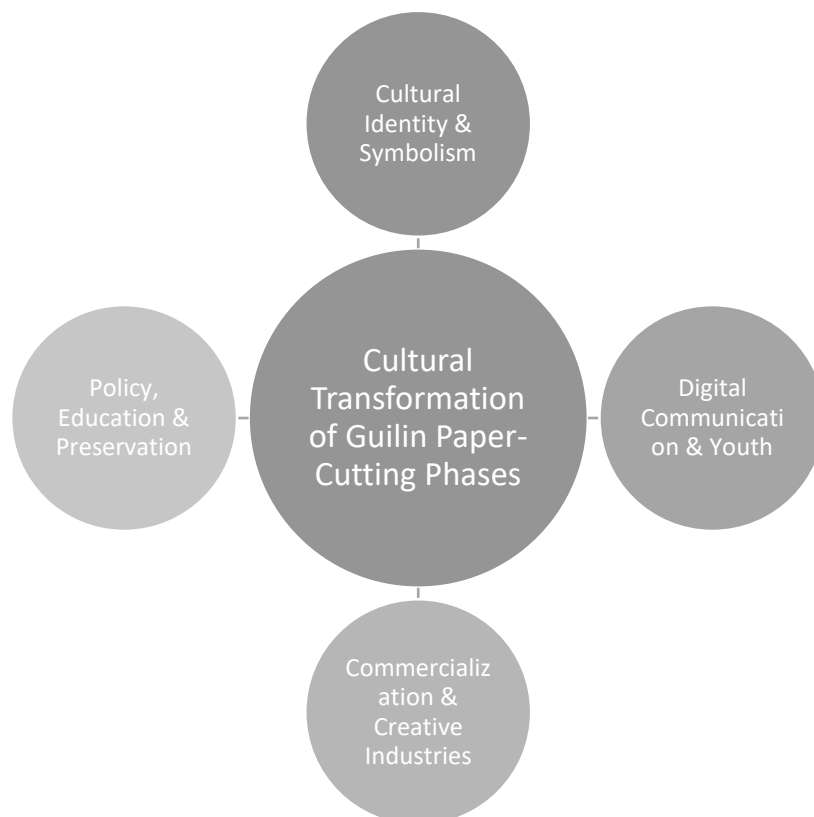


Figure 4 : Thematic Model of Intersecting Factors in The Cultural Transformation of Guilin Paper-Cutting: Cultural Identity and Symbolism, Digital Communication and Youth, Policy and Education, And Commercialization and Creative Industries.

A thematic analysis of 50 scholarly articles revealed four dominant research themes shaping the contemporary evolution of Guilin paper-cutting: **cultural identity**, **digital media**, **institutional support**, and **market forces**. These themes illustrate how traditional craft practices are continuously reshaped at the intersection of cultural preservation and modern societal change. Cultural identity remains the foundation of the craft, sustaining its symbolic vocabulary and regional distinctiveness. At the same time, digital media introduces new channels for reinterpretation, dissemination, and youth engagement, accelerating stylistic diversification. Institutional support through schools, museums, and government cultural initiatives plays a stabilizing role by formalizing transmission pathways and ensuring intergenerational continuity. Market forces further influence the craft's trajectory by encouraging innovation aligned with tourism, creative industries, and cultural consumption. Taken together, these four dimensions interact dynamically to drive both preservation and transformation. The thematic model (Figure 4) synthesizes these interconnected influences, presenting a holistic framework for understanding how Guilin paper-cutting negotiates its cultural heritage within the demands of contemporary society.

Symbolic Evolution in Guilin Paper-Cutting (Symbol Dimension)

The findings reveal that Guilin paper-cutting has undergone a significant evolution in symbolic expression as practitioners reinterpret traditional motifs through contemporary cultural and technological lenses. Historically, Guilin paper-cutting featured motifs closely tied to regional identity, such as karst mountains, river landscapes, and ethnic cultural symbols. Traditional works emphasized auspicious patterns, symmetry, and narrative scenes that reflected spiritual beliefs and communal values. However, recent visual analyses and practitioner reflections indicate a shift toward hybridized forms, where classical elements are combined with modern aesthetics—such as simplified geometric shapes, cartoon-inspired representations, and digitally stylized outlines. This symbolic evolution is particularly visible in digital-paper-cutting used in short videos, social media stickers, and tourism merchandise. While these transformations maintain recognizable cultural signatures, they also introduce accessible visual languages that appeal to broader, younger audiences. The reinterpretation of symbols demonstrates a dynamic cultural continuity, where traditional motifs function not as static relics but as adaptable cultural signs capable of responding to contemporary aesthetic trends.

Emotional Identification and Youth Engagement (Emotion Dimension)

A central finding of the study is the increasing emotional resonance that Guilin paper-cutting holds for younger audiences, particularly through digital media platforms. Interview participants consistently described feelings of nostalgia, cultural pride, and aesthetic pleasure when engaging with reimagined paper-cutting designs. These emotional connections are strengthened through interactive environments such as Douyin, Bilibili, and WeChat, where paper-cutting is circulated as part of everyday visual culture. Youth engagement is not limited to passive consumption; instead, digital reinterpretations invite playful interaction, including tracing digital patterns, remixing motifs, or sharing personalized adaptations. Participants noted that the emotional appeal of “cute,” “stylized,” or “modernized” paper-cutting patterns makes the craft feel approachable and less rigid than its traditional form. This emotional identification helps bridge the generational gap, transforming paper-cutting from a specialized heritage practice into a relatable cultural expression embedded in daily communication, social identity, and creative self-expression. Such affective engagement reinforces cultural attachment and encourages sustainable participation in both digital and physical craft activities.

Behavioral Transformation in Creation and Transmission (Behavior Dimension)

The findings also highlight a significant transformation in the behavioral patterns associated with the creation, learning, and dissemination of Guilin paper-cutting. Traditional modes of transmission—master-apprentice teaching, family-based learning, and community festivals—remain important but are now complemented by diversified pathways shaped by schools, museums, and digital platforms. Educational institutions increasingly incorporate paper-cutting into art curricula, allowing students to learn techniques systematically while understanding historical meanings. Museums provide interactive workshops and exhibitions that encourage hands-on participation and cultural interpretation. Moreover, digital environments have reshaped how individuals approach the craft: young people increasingly learn techniques from online tutorials, follow craft influencers, or participate in virtual workshops. The ease of sharing digital-paper-cutting on social media has also expanded the craft's visibility and encouraged peer-driven learning communities. This shift from localized, face-to-face teaching to multi-channel, self-directed learning reflects a broader behavioral transformation, where transmission is no longer limited to physical spaces but extended across hybrid cultural ecosystems. At the same time, commercialization through tourism markets and creative industries has encouraged practitioners to innovate, producing derivative products that integrate design, storytelling, and experiential value. These behavioral changes reveal how Guilin paper-cutting has adapted to new cultural environments, allowing the craft to remain relevant in modern life while sustaining its heritage roots.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Guilin paper-cutting is undergoing a dynamic process of cultural transformation shaped by symbolic reinterpretation, heightened emotional engagement among younger audiences, and significant shifts in modes of learning and transmission. When viewed through the thematic model developed in the literature review, comprising cultural identity, digital media, institutional support, and market forces, it becomes clear that these four dimensions form an interconnected ecosystem influencing the craft's evolution in contemporary society.

The first major finding, symbolic evolution, reveals how traditional motifs are recontextualized through stylistic simplification, digital aesthetics, and hybridized visual forms. This transformation aligns closely with the theme of **cultural identity**, which remains the cultural anchor through which Guilin's regional motifs are continuously preserved and reinterpreted. Even as forms become modernized, the persistence of local landscapes, auspicious symbols, and ethnic elements reflects ongoing cultural continuity. This supports previous scholarship emphasizing that traditional cultural symbols are not static but adapt flexibly to new aesthetic and social environments (Chen & Xu, 2020; Luo, 2018). The SEB framework also helps clarify this process: symbolic evolution corresponds to the "Symbol" dimension, in which visual motifs serve as carriers of meaning and identity.

The second finding, emotional identification and youth engagement, underscores the transformative role of **digital media** in revitalizing public interest in the craft. Platforms such as Douyin and WeChat not only circulate paper-cutting widely but also encourage personalized interaction, remixing, and creative reinterpretation. These practices foster emotional resonance—particularly nostalgia, cultural pride, and aesthetic joy among younger users. This trend aligns with studies indicating that digital environments amplify cultural participation and increase affective investment in traditional arts (Huang & Zhang, 2022; Liu & Peng, 2020).

Through the SEB lens, emotional identification corresponds to the “Emotion” dimension, demonstrating how digital reinterpretations enhance affective connection and cultural relevance. Digital media, therefore, functions as an accelerator in the cultural ecosystem, expanding the craft’s visibility and embedding it within contemporary youth culture.

The third finding, behavioral transformation in creation and transmission, reflects the combined influences of **institutional support** and **market forces**. Schools, museums, and community organizations provide structured spaces where paper-cutting can be learned, contextualized, and preserved, reinforcing the argument that institutional participation is crucial for sustaining intangible cultural heritage (Zhang & Wu, 2020; Guo & Lin, 2019). Complementing this, the tourism and creative industries drive innovation in design applications, diversify product forms, and encourage practitioners to develop contemporary cultural merchandise. This integration of education, commercial practice, and cultural consumption corresponds to the “Behavior” dimension of the SEB framework, illustrating how individuals’ participation patterns shift from traditional master-apprentice learning to multi-channel, hybrid modes of engagement. These findings resonate with prior research emphasizing that adaptive transmission pathways are essential for the long-term vitality of traditional crafts (Fan, 2021; Ma, 2021).

Synthesizing these findings, the Discussion highlights that the four thematic forces do not operate independently but intersect within a broader cultural transformation system. Cultural identity provides the symbolic foundation; digital media drives reinterpretation and visibility; institutional support ensures structured learning and cultural continuity; and market forces stimulate innovation and sustainable development. Within this ecosystem, Guilin paper-cutting moves beyond preservation toward active cultural renewal, allowing the craft to maintain its heritage value while adapting to contemporary social contexts. The SEB framework further clarifies this dynamic by revealing how symbols evolve, emotions deepen, and behaviors diversify as the craft circulates across traditional and digital spaces.

These insights extend existing research by offering a more integrated understanding of how traditional crafts transform within modern cultural ecosystems. They also provide practical implications: educators can design curricula that balance heritage skills with creative freedom; cultural institutions can develop interactive programs that strengthen emotional engagement; and policymakers can support sustainable craft industries by aligning cultural identity with innovation-driven markets. For practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of engaging with new media and diversified transmission channels while ensuring that modern adaptations remain culturally grounded.

Overall, the Discussion affirms that Guilin paper-cutting is not simply being preserved but is actively evolving through symbolic, emotional, and behavioral shifts driven by intersecting cultural forces. This integrated transformation underscores the craft’s capacity to remain vibrant, meaningful, and relevant in the contemporary era.

Conclusion

This study examined the evolving landscape of Guilin paper-cutting through the combined lens of the Symbol–Emotion–Behavior (SEB) framework and the thematic model encompassing cultural identity, digital media, institutional support, and market forces. The findings demonstrate that Guilin paper-cutting is not merely being preserved but is actively transformed through ongoing symbolic reinterpretation, renewed emotional resonance, and changing

behavioral patterns of participation. Traditional motifs such as karst landscapes and auspicious symbols continue to anchor the craft's cultural identity, yet they are increasingly expressed through simplified forms, digital aesthetics, and hybrid visual languages. This symbolic evolution ensures that the craft remains recognizable while becoming accessible to contemporary audiences.

Digital media plays a pivotal role in deepening emotional identification, particularly among young people who engage with paper-cutting through interactive platforms, short-video culture, and digital remixing. These forms of participation expand the emotional appeal of the craft and bring traditional aesthetics into everyday visual communication. At the same time, institutional support from schools, museums, and community organizations stabilizes cultural transmission by providing structured learning environments, while market forces foster creative innovation through tourism products, derivative design, and cultural industries. Together, these elements illustrate how behavioral transformation occurs as individuals shift from traditional master-apprentice learning to diversified, hybrid modes of creation, sharing, and consumption.

The integration of these four forces confirms that the transformation of Guilin paper-cutting is the result of a multi-layered cultural ecosystem rather than a linear process. The SEB framework further clarifies this process by showing how symbolic reinterpretation fuels emotional engagement, which in turn drives new forms of participation and cultural continuity. The study contributes to the broader understanding of intangible cultural heritage by demonstrating how traditional crafts can remain socially relevant when embedded within digital environments, educational structures, and creative economies.

While the qualitative approach provides deep cultural insight, future studies could incorporate mixed methods such as surveys, digital analytics, or ethnographic observation to explore user perceptions and behavioral patterns in greater detail. Nonetheless, the findings offer meaningful implications for designers, educators, cultural policymakers, and heritage practitioners seeking to sustain and innovate traditional crafts in contemporary contexts. Guilin paper-cutting, as shown in this study, exemplifies how cultural heritage can evolve in ways that honor its historical roots while embracing new modes of expression, ensuring its vitality for future generations.

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