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The protection and publicity of Qianjiao Lamp in Dongguan

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Abstract: Qianjiao Lamp is a unique traditional festive lantern in Dongguan since the Southern Song Dynasty. In history, it was lit to pray for family prosperity. As an intangible cultural heritage, and also the First Lamp in China, it is important to protect Qianjiao Lamp. This study examines the protection and publicity of Qianjiao Lamp in Dongguan from the perspective of protecting the intangible culture heritage. The purpose of the study is to raise people's awareness of protecting the intangible culture heritage of Qianjiao Lamp and, at the same time, let it be truly protected and passed on.

Keywords: Dongguan Qianjiao Lamp; intangible cultural heritage; protection; folk craft

1. Introduction

Qianjiao Lamp, a distinctive Dongguan lantern dating back to the Southern Song Dynasty, is renowned for its intricate craftsmanship and symbolic design. Known as the "First Lantern of China", Qianjiao Lamp embodies Dongguan's historical and cultural legacy. Originally resembling imperial octagonal palace lanterns from the Song Dynasty, it evolved through local innovation. In the Dongguan dialect, "One Thousand Lamp" (千角灯) phonetically resembles "One Thousand Ding" (千个丁), symbolizing the wish for a flourishing family lineage. During festivals, families lit these lanterns to pray for prosperity and descendants [1].

Today, only three authentic Qianjiao Lamps remain in Dongguan, facing existential threats due to difficult maintaining and complex technology. Especially because the few remaining inheritors of the craft dies one after another and people have different lifestyles nowadays, Qianjiao Lamp is in a situation where it cannot be passed on. This study explores innovative approaches to preserve and promote Qianjiao Lamp as part of China's intangible cultural heritage, dig deep into the historical and contemporary significance of the lamp, find innovative development for Qianjiao Lamp, and expand the influence of Qianjiao Lamp in Dongguan and even in the whole country.



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2. Historical legacy and cultural significance

2.1. Historical origins and symbolism

Qianjiao Lamp traces its roots to the Song Dynasty's imperial palace lanterns. According to legend, Princess Zhao Meirong, a descendant of Emperor Zhao Kuangyin, commissioned local folk craftsmen to recreate palace lanterns during her exile in Dongguan. The lantern's structure comprises five parts: the crown, body, pillar, lamps, and 24 embroidered silk strips (known as "Royal Ribbons"), depicting pictures of the "Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars." Its design symbolizes unity, prosperity, and familial continuity.

As a cultural emblem, Qianjiao Lamp reflects Dongguan's historical identity, offering insights into traditional customs and community values.

2.2. Contemporary inheritance

In 1949, master craftsmen Zhang Jinpei, Zhang Sen, and Yin Quan revived the lamp's production. Collaborating with the government, they created and made three surviving lamps. They are now displayed in Cultural exhibition hall. However, the craft of making Qianjiao Lamp faces near-extinction due to its labor-intensive process and limited apprentices. Zhang Shuqi, the son of Zhang Jinpei, remains the sole inheritor. To address this, the Guancheng District Government established workshops and training programs to cultivate new artisans.

3. Research at home and abroad

3.1. Research at home

Recent domestic studies on Qianjiao Lamp have shifted from simple manual inheritance to digital and cultural-creative methods. Research is concentrated in southern China (especially Dongguan), with limited attention in northern regions. Key focuses include: Feng Guoshan (2019) [2], in *The Necessity of ICH Protection: A Case Study of Dongguan Qianjiao Lamp*, highlighted the lamp's underutilized historical significance. Su Zhuan (2019) [3] emphasized integrating the craft into design education in *Digitization and Innovation of Dongguan's ICH*. Zhang Qiao and He Shuai (2020), in *Digital Inheritance Strategies for Dongguan Qianjiao Lamp* [4], proposed using 3D modeling and VR to document craftsmanship. Guo Mengke (2018) explored innovative protection paths in *Current Status and Protection Strategies for Qianjiao Lamp* [5]. Su Zhuan (2018–2020) published multiple works (e.g., *Artistic Resources of Qianjiao Lamp and Derivative Design*, *Integration of Dongguan ICH into Design Education*), advocating for modern adaptations like themed puzzles and accessories [6].

However, most studies lack in-depth analysis of the lamp's historical context, hindering public understanding of its cultural depth.

3.2. Research abroad

No dedicated foreign research on Qianjiao Lamp exists. International academic attention remains minimal, with no publications or systematic studies identified. Future efforts should leverage domestic

findings to guide global collaborations, such as cross-cultural exhibitions or joint digital archiving projects.

4. Protection and publicity

4.1. Protection measures

As time flies, the craftsmanship of making Qiaojiao Lamp has endured for thousands of years and been passed down from generation to generation. With the support and assistance of various sectors of society, people have explored many new ways to protect and inherit Qiaojiao Lamp, making it radiate new vitality. These innovative inheritances have truly made Qiaojiao Lamp a cultural treasure that will never be lost.

Firstly, it is inseparable from the decades-long perseverance of the inheritor Zhang Shuqi. He adheres to the craftsmanship spirit of his predecessors and guards the charm and elegance of Qiaojiao Lamp as the "The First Lamp in China". It also cannot be achieved without the support and help of countless Chinese people and all sectors of society. In recent years, the Dongguan government has introduced a series of protective measures for the protection of the Dongguan Qiaojiao Lamp, including opening courses and allocating special funds. Among them, the Guancheng Cultural Service Center has established the "Dongguan Qiaojiao Lamp Inheritance Class", inviting inheritors to teach in person, cultivating and selecting a new generation of skilled successors. Through comprehensive, systematic and highly targeted training, Qiaojiao Lamp craftsmanship can be passed on. Furthermore, creating a Qiaojiao Lamp craft studio, exploring its commercial value, building a unique brand for Qiaojiao Lamp, increasing its popularity, and realizing commercial operation, so that Qiaojiao Lamp has a broader development space and a higher development level. Secondly, activate modern inheritance. Let the making technique of Qiaojiao Lamp be widely spread and carried forward through modern technology, and use digital media to tell our cultural stories and the historical stories of the "Qianjiao Lamp". In addition, vigorously publicize the history of Qianjiao Lamp, carry forward its internal culture with the help of festivals and celebrations, discover potential inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage, and enhance the national attention and love for Qianjiao Lamp.

4.2. Publicity strategies

As a folk-craft treasure, Qianjiao Lamp has a long history, complex features, and high cost. It's hard for ordinary people to access or need it. To integrate it into public life, it needs to match modern needs and aesthetics, breaking stereotypes. At the "Qianjiao Lamp Series" cultural-creative product launch in Dongguan Cultural Center's Intangible Cultural Heritage Hall, related products like metal puzzles were launched, making it enter people's daily life. "The 'First Lamp in China' is guarded by an old craftsman." Zhang Shuqi, the inheritor, often heard his father say, "Qianjiao Lamp, a thousand corners, a thousand lamps" in childhood. It's not an ordinary lantern, with delicate patterns, embroidery, and a complex structure. It will take eight months to make one Qianjiao Lamp. Its charm, along with the artisans' inheritance stories and skills, earns great respect. Qianjiao Lamp carries Dongguan people's beliefs and customs. In the local dialect, it sounds like "a thousand male descendants", symbolizing family prosperity. It has become a custom to watch Qianjiao Lamp and pray for sons for the family in

Guancheng. As long as the technology of making Qianjiao Lamp is still there and its cultural connotation is still there, it can continue to emit charm in the long river of history and keep shining.

5. Conclusion

While Dongguan has made strides in safeguarding Qianjiao Lamp, not enough is being done in digital innovation and global visibility. Future efforts must prioritize cross-disciplinary integration, youth engagement, and international partnerships to ensure this cultural treasure thrives in the modern era.

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Conflicts of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contribution

Conceptualization, Meiyi Li and Lushi Chu; methodology, Meiyi Li; software, Lushi Chu; validation, Meiyi Li, Lushi Chu and Meiyi Li; formal analysis, Ziyang Chen; investigation, Mixuan Zhou; resources, Yinghong Xu; data curation, Feifei Li; writing—original draft preparation, Meiyi Li; writing—review and editing, Mixuan Zou; visualization, Feifei Li; supervision, Meiyi Li; project administration, Meiyi Li; funding acquisition, Yinghong Xu. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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