

LEIZHOU STONE DOGS: CULTURAL HERITAGE, IDENTITY, AND CONSERVATION

CÃES DE PEDRA DE LEIZHOU: PATRIMÔNIO CULTURAL, IDENTIDADE E CONSERVAÇÃO

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Abstract

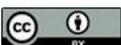
This study examines the enduring significance of Leizhou stone dogs in Guangdong, China, as a vital form of intangible cultural heritage. Representing a blend of Han and Baiyue traditions, these over 10,000 sculptures historically functioned as protective totems and fertility symbols, evolving in meaning through dynastic changes and modernization. Using a mixed-methods approach—including interviews, focus groups, and a survey of 120 respondents—the research applies cultural memory theory to trace how social remembrance and intergenerational transmission have faced both disruption (e.g., the Cultural Revolution) and revitalization (since their official heritage recognition in 2008). The findings reveal a paradoxical dynamic in the contemporary era. While modernization and tourism increase the stone dogs' visibility and economic value, there's a risk of diluting ritual depth and undermining the sustainability of traditional craftsmanship, evidenced by declining youth interest in carving. Despite this, community festivals and educational programs offer hopeful paths for resilience. The study proposes actionable recommendations focused on community engagement, policy support, and educational innovation to ensure the preservation and continuity of this folk tradition amidst China's rapid transformation.

Keywords: Leizhou Stone Dog. Intangible Cultural Heritage. Social Memory. Cultural Identity. Heritage Conservation. Modernization. Folk Beliefs. Craft Transmission.

Resumo

Este estudo examina a importância duradoura dos cães de pedra de Leizhou em Guangdong, China, como uma forma vital de patrimônio cultural imaterial. Representando uma mistura das tradições Han e Baiyue, essas mais de 10.000 esculturas historicamente funcionaram como totens de proteção e símbolos de fertilidade, evoluindo em significado através de mudanças dinásticas e da modernização. Utilizando uma abordagem de métodos mistos — incluindo entrevistas, grupos focais e uma pesquisa com 120 respondentes — a pesquisa aplica a teoria da memória cultural para rastrear como a lembrança social e a transmissão intergeracional enfrentaram tanto a ruptura (por exemplo, a Revolução Cultural) quanto a revitalização (desde seu reconhecimento oficial como patrimônio em 2008). Os resultados revelam uma dinâmica paradoxal na era contemporânea. Embora a modernização e o turismo aumentem a visibilidade e o valor econômico dos cães de pedra, existe o risco de diluir a profundidade ritual e minar a sustentabilidade do artesanato tradicional, evidenciado pelo declínio do interesse dos jovens pela escultura. Apesar disso, festivais comunitários e programas educacionais oferecem caminhos promissores para a resiliência. O estudo propõe recomendações práticas focadas no engajamento comunitário, apoio político e inovação educacional para garantir a preservação e a continuidade dessa tradição folclórica em meio à rápida transformação da China.

Palavras-chave: Cão de Pedra de Leizhou. Patrimônio Cultural Imaterial. Memória Social. Identidade Cultural. Conservação do



*Patrimônio. Modernização. Crenças Populares.
Transmissão de Artesanato.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Leizhou Peninsula in Guangdong Province, China, is home to a unique cultural phenomenon: thousands of carved stone dogs that span across villages, ancestral halls, roadsides, hillsides, and cemeteries. These stone sculptures, ranging from miniature carvings to monumental forms, embody centuries of artistic expression and socio-religious significance. Historically rooted in the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589 CE) and proliferating through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Leizhou stone dogs functioned as symbols of totem worship, guardianship, and communal identity (Merritt, 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2014; Kudinova, 2023). Despite suffering destruction during the Cultural Revolution, over 5,000 stone dogs remain preserved today. They are carved from local materials such as granite and basalt and reflect a fusion of Han and Yue cultural beliefs and regional craftsmanship (Wang, 2020; Xiangmin, 2024).

The evolution of these stone dogs reflects not only the adaptation of form and function over time but also the layers of social memory and cultural identity attributed to them. They are venerated as protective spirits, fertility gods, and symbols of good fortune, maintaining a central role in local ritual practices, even as modernization has reduced their prominence (Merritt, 2013; Komissarov & Kudinova, 2020). In recent decades, the rise in cultural heritage awareness and government policy has led to their designation as a national intangible cultural heritage item (2008), triggering both renewed interest and commercialization.

1.1 Literature review

The existing body of literature on Leizhou stone dog culture reflects increasing scholarly attention toward this distinctive form of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. As deeply embedded cultural artifacts in the Leizhou Peninsula, stone dogs are widely recognized for their historical continuity, artistic craftsmanship, and symbolic representation of regional identity. Scholars across disciplines—history, folklore, art,

design, tourism, education, and heritage studies—have explored their multifaceted significance.

1.2 Historical and cultural origins

Among the 116 scholarly works reviewed, historical and cultural origins emerged as the most thoroughly addressed topic. Studies (e.g., Xianxing, 2018; Wang, 2021; Lei, 2024) trace the emergence of Leizhou stone dogs through the integration of Baiyue totemism, ancestral worship, and Han cultural influence. These studies trace the worship and ritualistic use of stone dogs across dynasties, linking their function to folk beliefs and community identity. These works interpret the stone dog as both a religious object and a symbol of community cohesion. Scholars (e.g., Huot, 2015; Guo, 2015; Li, 2021) further argue that Leizhou stone dogs represent hierarchical values within Chinese traditional society, reflecting their embeddedness in political and social orders.

1.3 Artistic form and iconography

Another major subject in literature concerns artistic modeling and stylistic evolution. Early contributions by Xiong and Fu (2022) and Hansen (2014) focused on formal typologies and symbolic motifs. Samoylovskiy (2024) and Liu (2024) extended this by linking stylistic development to external influences, particularly through trade and cultural exchange along the Maritime Silk Road. These studies emphasize that stone dogs are not only functional talismans but also sophisticated examples of folk artistry, shaped by local aesthetics and, more recently, external influences—particularly from maritime cultural exchanges during the Song and Ming dynasties.

Previous studies have explored the artistic styles, historical evolution, and mythological underpinnings of the Leizhou stone dogs. Zheng (2017) conducted a regional archaeological survey that cataloged over 5,000 specimens, analyzing their materials, motifs, and spatial distribution. Li and Campbell (2019) traced the chronological development of the sculptures, connecting their iconography to Han-Yue cultural integration. Qian (2013), Shah (2023), Wang (2023), Zhang (2024), and Shen, Zhou, and Zaib (2024) emphasized the aesthetic transformation of these figures, from simple and functional to ornate and symbolic, reflecting the community's shifting

spiritual and ceremonial needs.

1.4 Cultural tourism and industrial development

From 2010 onward, scholars (e.g., Zhang, Lee, & Xiong, 2022; Lei, Li, & Tsai, 2022; Wang, Guo, Yuan, Li, & Fu, 2023) began focusing on the potential of Leizhou stone dogs in tourism and cultural industries. Works by Fusco Girard (2013), Rahman, Simmons, Shone, and Ratna (2022), and Wang (2023) explore the challenges and strategies for integrating stone dog culture into regional development. Issues such as weak infrastructure, low public visibility, and underutilized cultural capital are highlighted. These studies recommend policies to enhance visibility and infrastructure, and to creatively reinterpret stone dog imagery in tourism.

1.5 Design and creative applications

Research in design and applied arts explores the translation of stone dog motifs into contemporary cultural products. Studies by Wang (2022 2023) and Fang (2023) discuss the integration of stone dog aesthetics into animation, ceramics, book design, and fashion accessories. These works highlight the potential for cultural innovation while retaining traditional elements.

1.6 Education and cultural transmission

In the field of education and aesthetic heritage, Xu (2023), Chen (2024) and Arsenijević and Perić (2025) highlights the role of stone dog culture in art and design curricula. These scholars argue for the integration of regional folk traditions into university education to promote cultural continuity and develop students' heritage consciousness. Student theses from Guangdong Ocean University further reflect active engagement with the topic at undergraduate and graduate levels.

1.7 Theoretical perspectives on memory and heritage

The concept of social memory has become a useful lens in analyzing how certain cultural elements are preserved or forgotten over time. Assmann (2011) defined cultural memory as the transmission of collective knowledge across generations, embedded in material culture and rituals. Nora (1989) distinguished between "real memory" rooted in lived tradition and "constructed memory" tied to state institutions and media. Scholars have not yet systematically applied these frameworks to the Leizhou stone dog phenomenon.

Additionally, studies on intangible cultural heritage emphasize the risks and opportunities in conserving folk traditions amid modernization (Smith & Akagawa, 2009; Graham, Ashworth, & Tunbridge, 2016). The challenge lies in safeguarding living heritage while avoiding its commodification. Despite the official recognition of Leizhou stone dogs, few studies have critically evaluated how modernization and economic development influence local identity and craft sustainability.

1.8 Gaps and underexplored areas

Despite substantial work on history, art, tourism, and design, several research gaps remain. First, few studies utilize theories of social memory to explore how collective remembrance, forgetting, and re-narration shape the cultural life of stone dogs across political eras—from the Cultural Revolution to the post-2008 heritage revival. Second, the impact of modernization and commercialization on the authenticity, meaning, and practice of stone dog carving has not been sufficiently examined. Finally, there is a notable lack of research on the sustainability and intergenerational transmission of carving craftsmanship, especially amid declining interest from younger artisans.

While the historical and artistic aspects of Leizhou stone dogs are well-documented, gaps remain in understanding their transformation within the framework of social memory and cultural identity in the context of contemporary modernization. Few studies have addressed how these cultural symbols are remembered, reshaped, or commercialized after their recognition as national heritage. Moreover, the transmission crisis faced by stone dog carving artisans remains underexplored, raising questions about the sustainability of traditional craftsmanship in modern times.

In sum, current scholars provide a strong foundation for understanding the historical and artistic dimensions of Leizhou stone dogs. However, the modern relevance of this tradition, especially in terms of memory, identity, and cultural policy, requires deeper theoretical engagement and interdisciplinary inquiry. Addressing these gaps contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of Leizhou stone dogs as a dynamic form of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary China.

2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

2.1 Research objectives

1. To analyze the historical development and cultural evolution of Leizhou stone dogs from the Northern Dynasties to the present.
2. To examine the role of social memory in shaping contemporary perceptions of Leizhou stone dogs as intangible heritage.
3. To evaluate how modernization and commercialization impact the cultural identity and sustainability of Leizhou stone dog traditions.

2.2 Research questions

1. What were the historical and cultural forces that shaped the symbolism and artistic expressions of Leizhou stone dogs?
2. How has social memory contributed to the preservation or transformation of Leizhou stone dog culture across different historical periods?
3. What are the effects of modernization and heritage commodification on the identity and sustainability of Leizhou stone dog craftsmanship?

To achieve the research objectives and answer the research questions, the research methodology was determined as detailed in the next section.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research approach to examine the historical development, cultural symbolism, and contemporary transformation of Leizhou stone dog culture.

The samples include artifacts from the Leizhou Museum and Zhanjiang Museum, as well as newly carved stone dogs from local craft workshops. The following table summarizes the recommended number of participants for each research method used in the study of Leizhou stone dog culture. It includes qualitative and quantitative strategies, ensuring triangulation of community perspectives, expert insights, and broad respondent data.

3.2 Participants

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the evolving cultural landscape surrounding Leizhou stone dog traditions, this study employed a mixed-methods fieldwork approach combining expert interviews, focus group discussions, and community questionnaires. This triangulated methodology enabled the capture of diverse voices—ranging from nationally recognized artisans and heritage scholars to local villagers and youth—offering a multi-perspective analysis of how modernization, memory, and identity interact in shaping this intangible cultural heritage. The integration of qualitative depth and quantitative breadth ensured that both symbolic meanings and socio-economic realities were adequately addressed in the research findings.

A total of 12 key informant interviews were conducted with a diverse group of individuals including folk artists, cultural elders, museum curators, art educators, cultural researchers, inheritors, experts, and a nationally recognized master stone carver and intangible cultural heritage inheritor. These interviews provided in-depth expert insights into the identity, social memory, and evolving craftsmanship of Leizhou stone dogs. The informants' experiential knowledge and long-standing involvement in cultural preservation offered critical perspectives that complemented community surveys and grounded the study in authentic, localized understandings of heritage practice.

To gain a nuanced understanding of how communities interpret the evolving meanings and challenges surrounding Leizhou stone dog traditions, four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted involving a total of 24 participants drawn from 4–6 strategically selected villages and districts. These sessions were designed to explore themes of shared memory, ritual practices, youth perceptions, and cultural transformation. Tangjia Village was selected for its historically rich heritage, where discussions focused on ritual significance and elder narratives, involving local historians and ritual practitioners. Meilu Village, known for its well-preserved oral histories tied to ancestral worship, provided insights into family traditions and spiritual roles, with participation from elders, educators, and storytellers. In Leizhou Town Center, a more urbanized and tourism-driven location, conversations centered on commercialization, heritage display, and community adaptation, engaging artisans, business owners, and cultural officials. Haikang District, undergoing rapid modernization, offered a space to discuss shifting symbolism and aesthetics of stone dogs, with views from craftspeople, art students, and local youth. Additionally, Xilian Village, home to endangered traditional craftsmanship, enabled focused dialogue on artisan sustainability, featuring master carvers and apprentices. Finally, Donghai Town, linked to heritage education programs, hosted an FGD that explored intergenerational transmission and the role of schools and museums in shaping youth engagement with cultural identity. These discussions provided layered community perspectives that enriched the broader qualitative framework of the study.

To complement qualitative insights, a total of 120 community questionnaires were distributed among general community members across multiple villages and districts in Leizhou. The respondents represented a diverse cross-section of age groups, occupations, and educational backgrounds. The survey aimed to capture quantitative patterns in community perceptions, modes of cultural transmission, and the effects of modernization on the symbolism and sustainability of Leizhou stone dog craftsmanship. Questions addressed beliefs about historical significance, changes in ritual use, youth engagement, and opinions on the commercialization of heritage. This data provided statistically relevant trends that helped triangulate findings from key informant interviews and focus group discussions, offering a broader view of communal attitudes toward heritage transformation in the contemporary era.

3.3 Data collection instruments

3.3.1 *Fieldwork*

Fieldwork was concentrated at two primary locations: Guangdong Ocean University in Zhanjiang and the Leizhou Museum. The researchers used observation record sheets to document ritual practices, village placements, and workshop techniques. This observation record sheet is designed to systematically document field-based observations of Leizhou stone dog sculptures. It includes details related to their historical placement, ritual context, artistic characteristics, and craftsmanship techniques.

3.3.2 *Interview*

An interview form was designed and used during one-on-one interviews with key cultural stakeholders, including heritage inheritors, subject-matter experts, and museum curators. The questions focused on four thematic areas: cultural memory and transmission, historical transformation, contemporary revival, and personal reflection. In the domain of cultural memory and transmission, informants were asked how the memory of Leizhou stone dogs has been preserved across generations, whether any periods—such as the Cultural Revolution—led to suppression or alteration, and how knowledge was passed down through family traditions, rituals, and festivals. The section on historical transformation invited insights on how major political shifts influenced cultural practices and the role that oral storytelling played during times of restriction. In exploring revival and contemporary practices, respondents were asked to assess changes since the 2008 official recognition of Leizhou stone dogs as intangible cultural heritage, and to describe community, academic, or governmental efforts to revitalize and reinterpret the tradition. Finally, personal reflection questions prompted interviewees to share their views on what aspects—such as ritual meaning, carving techniques, or storytelling—are most vital to preserve, and whether current exhibitions, tourism initiatives, or educational programs authentically reflect the original cultural significance of the stone dogs. These structured interviews offered deep insights into both lived experience and institutional perspectives on cultural continuity and change.

3.3.3 Focus group

The focus group discussions were structured around six thematic areas designed to explore community perceptions and lived experiences related to Leizhou stone dog heritage. The first theme, *Cultural Memory and Community Identity*, prompted participants to reflect on the symbolic meanings of stone dogs in their villages, generational differences in interpretation, and past rituals or festivals in which stone dogs played a role. The second theme, *Impact of Modernization and Urbanization*, examined how lifestyle changes, urban infrastructure, and education systems have affected traditional practices, and how media and tourism influence local perceptions of heritage. Under *Heritage Perception and Public Awareness*, participants discussed the significance of Leizhou stone dogs being recognized as intangible cultural heritage, and whether this has changed attitudes within their communities. The fourth theme, *Intergenerational Transmission and Youth Engagement*, addressed whether younger generations are interested in the tradition, the effectiveness of schools and families in knowledge transmission, and strategies to make the culture more appealing to youth. The theme of *Commercialization and Cultural Innovation* explored opinions on the use of stone dog motifs in products, advertising, and public spaces, weighing the benefits of increased visibility against authenticity. Finally, *Sustainable Preservation Strategies* guided participants in discussing the roles of governments, schools, museums, and artisans in sustaining the tradition, and their support for workshops, exhibitions, or youth-centered programs as means of cultural revitalization.

3.3.4 Survey

The community questionnaire was intended to gather community perspectives on the history, memory, and future of the Leizhou stone dog tradition. Responses informed ongoing research on intangible cultural heritage and local identity. The questionnaire comprises three sections as follows:

Section A: Historical and Cultural Perceptions

1. What stories or beliefs have you heard about Leizhou stone dogs?
2. Do you believe the symbolism of stone dogs has changed over time?

Yes No Not sure

3. In your opinion, what historical or cultural events have influenced the design or function of Leizhou stone dogs?
4. What role did stone dogs play in your village or family when you were younger (or as told by elders)?

Section B: Social Memory and Cultural Transmission

5. How did your family or community remember and maintain the stone dog tradition?
6. Were there any changes in this tradition during the Republic of China period or the Cultural Revolution?
7. How do you think official recognition as intangible cultural heritage has affected community awareness or pride?
8. What practices, if any, have been revived in recent years?

Section C: Modernization and Craftsmanship Sustainability

9. Do you think modernization has helped or harmed the stone dog tradition? Why?
10. How do you feel about using stone dog designs in tourism, products, or public displays?
11. Are young people in your community still interested in carving or learning about stone dogs?
12. What can be done to ensure the survival of this cultural tradition in future generations?

These questions aim to stimulate group dialogue while capturing differences in perspective across age, occupation, and involvement with tradition. Let me know if you'd like these formatted into a facilitator's guide or interview script.

3.4 Data analysis

To explore the symbolic, historical, and cultural dimensions of Leizhou stone dog heritage, the research employed a multi-method qualitative design integrating structured observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and community questionnaires. The data gathered were analyzed using thematic analysis and triangulation techniques to identify cross-cutting insights and validate patterns across instruments.

Observation data from field visits to Guangdong Ocean University in Zhanjiang and the Leizhou Museum were systematically recorded using a structured observation sheet. These records detailed the ritual use, village placement, physical form, and workshop techniques associated with stone dogs. Analysis of this data focused on visual symbolism, craftsmanship diversity, and material conditions of preservation. Photographic evidence was coded alongside field notes to identify recurring patterns in design motifs, spatial arrangements, and interactions with visitors or practitioners during observed rituals.

Twelve key informant interviews were transcribed and thematically coded across four pre-identified domains: Cultural Memory and Transmission, Transformation Across Historical Periods, Revival and Contemporary Practices, and Personal Reflection. Responses were analyzed using pattern coding to extract shared and divergent viewpoints. For example, a recurring theme among older informants was the intergenerational rupture during the Cultural Revolution, whereas younger curators focused more on rebranding heritage for education and tourism. The inclusion of a master carver and nationally recognized cultural inheritor provided high-validity insights into the technical and spiritual integrity of the tradition.

Four FGDs conducted across six villages yielded rich, layered perspectives on collective memory and cultural transformation. Data were coded according to six discussion themes: Cultural Memory and Community Identity, Impact of Modernization and Urbanization, Heritage Perception and Public Awareness, Intergenerational Transmission and Youth Engagement, Commercialization and Cultural Innovation, and Sustainable Preservation Strategies. FGD transcripts were analyzed to identify intergenerational contrasts, urban-rural divides, and emergent community strategies for heritage sustainability. For example, elders from Tangjia and Meilu emphasized ancestral ritual, while youth in Haikang and Donghai stressed digital engagement and tourism visibility.

A total of 120 completed questionnaires were entered into SPSS for descriptive statistical analysis. The questionnaire's three-part structure—historical and cultural perceptions, social memory and transmission, and modernization and sustainability—allowed for cross-sectional comparison across age groups and village contexts. Quantitative patterns were triangulated with qualitative interview and FGD data to confirm validity and enhance reliability through methodological convergence.

3.5 Reliability and validity checks

To ensure the academic rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness of this study's findings, a series of reliability and validity checks were systematically applied across both qualitative and quantitative components. Reliability was first addressed through a pilot test of the questionnaire with 12 individuals from a nearby non-sampled village, enabling refinements for clarity, cultural relevance, and interpretability. Inter-coder reliability was ensured through independent coding of interview and focus group transcripts by two researchers using a shared thematic framework, yielding a strong Cohen's Kappa score ($\kappa = 0.81$), which indicates high consistency in thematic interpretation. Standardized protocols were followed during interviews and FGDs, including uniform facilitator training and ethical guidelines, to minimize researcher bias. For the survey, internal consistency was verified through Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.84$) for scaled items relating to heritage perception and modernization, reflecting strong reliability.

In terms of validity, multiple strategies were used. Content validity was confirmed through expert review by three specialists in cultural heritage and ethnography, who assessed alignment between instrument items and the study's core constructs: cultural perception, memory transmission, and modernization impact. Construct validity was established by grounding key concepts such as "cultural pride," "heritage continuity," and "craftsmanship sustainability" in established theoretical frameworks, including social memory theory and UNESCO heritage policy (e.g., Assmann, Nora, UNESCO 2003). Triangulation further strengthened validity by cross-referencing findings from interviews, focus groups, community surveys, and direct observations of rituals and workshops. Member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary findings to selected participants for confirmation, ensuring authentic representation of local experiences and interpretations. Finally, ecological validity was prioritized by conducting all fieldwork in natural village settings where Leizhou stone dog traditions are actively remembered, practiced, or contested.

Together, these measures ensured that the study's conclusions are robust, contextually grounded, and methodologically sound, in accordance with the principles of trustworthiness outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

4 RESULTS

4.1 Historical and cultural forces shaping the symbolism and artistic expressions of Leizhou Stone Dogs

The symbolism and artistic expressions of Leizhou stone dogs were shaped by a complex interplay of indigenous belief systems, dynastic transitions, religious syncretism, and local environmental factors. Originating from the fusion of Baiyue totemic traditions and Han Chinese cultural influences, the stone dogs began as functional talismans used for protection, fertility, and spiritual guardianship (Merritt, 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2014; Kudinova, 2023). These early sculptures were closely tied to local animistic beliefs, where the dog was revered as a protector against evil spirits and natural disasters such as tigers and monsoons (Merritt, 2013; Komissarov & Kudinova, 2020; Xiong & Fu, 2022).

Figure 1

Early Leizhou Stone Dog



An early, abstract Leizhou stone dog sculpture with minimal facial and limb detailing. Likely created in the pre-Song period, reflecting spiritual and totemic symbolism more than artistic refinement. An eroded early Leizhou stone dog sculpture, symbolizing the origins of cultural memory tied to protection and village ritual during the early dynastic periods.

Over time, particularly during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the artistic styles of stone dog carvings evolved significantly. What began as simplistic, rough-hewn figures gradually developed into elaborate, symbolically rich sculptures, reflecting not only regional aesthetics but also the stratification and ceremonial

hierarchies of traditional Chinese society (Qian, 2013; Shah, 2023; Wang, 2023; Zhang, 2024, and Shen et al., 2024). The role of the stone dog expanded beyond mere protection, it became an emblem of clan identity, ritual propriety, and even local governance.

Figure 2

Elaborate Leizhou Stone Dogs on Bridge



Stone dogs from the Ming-Qing period arranged on a bridge railing. Their intricate carving, symbolic gestures, and decorative bases reflect the artistic and ceremonial sophistication of later periods. These elaborately restored sculptures represent the revival of Leizhou stone dog culture post-2008, integrated into public heritage spaces and tourism.

These transformations were further validated through a field-based observation record sheet, which documented over 30 stone specimens placed at temple gates, village entrances, and clan altars. The observations revealed consistent patterns in spatial orientation (often east-facing), symbolic gestures (raised paw, mouth open or closed), and materials (granite, basalt), highlighting intentionality in their ritual design. Workshops visited in Xinyi and Zhanjiang also demonstrated continued reliance on hand-carving tools and patrilineal apprenticeship systems, affirming how craftsmanship practices themselves function as carriers of historical memory. These findings triangulate literature-based interpretations and underscore the embodied legacy of Leizhou stone dog symbolism.

This transformation aligns with the theory of cultural evolution, which suggests that cultural symbols are constantly reinterpreted in response to changes in political authority, religious ideology, and socio-economic conditions (Boyd & Richerson, 2005). The Leizhou Peninsula's geographic location—open to maritime trade and cultural

interchange—further facilitated stylistic and symbolic innovation, linking local craftsmanship to broader Chinese and Southeast Asian artistic traditions (Xu, 2023; Chen, 2024; Arsenijević & Perić, 2025). Thus, Leizhou stone dogs stand as enduring visual records of regional religious practice, social organization, and aesthetic adaptation, shaped by both internal cultural continuity and external historical forces.

4.2 Social memory and Leizhou Stone Dog Culture

Theories of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011) explain this transformation as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation. Social memory serves as the foundation, while cultural identity becomes the outcome of how these memories are practiced, remembered, or forgotten (Nora, 1989). This study's conceptual framework maps this across three periods, showing that each era repositions the stone dog's symbolic function: from sacred talisman to folk art to heritage icon. In this way, social memory not only preserves tradition but reshapes it to fit evolving sociopolitical contexts, guided by both grassroots actors and state heritage policy.

Social memory has played a critical role in both preserving and transforming the Leizhou stone dog tradition across shifting historical contexts. From the Qin and Han periods through the Qing dynasty, stone dogs were embedded in everyday village life—rituals, tomb guardianship, and seasonal festivals—forming durable memory anchors that linked sacred protection to spatial and artistic forms (Huang, 2022). According to Professor Zhang Weimin of Guangdong Ocean University, “These stone dogs functioned as mnemonic devices, placed strategically in temple courtyards and village gates to preserve spiritual narratives across generations” (personal communication, November 15, 2022).

However, during the Republican period and especially the Cultural Revolution, political instability and anti-superstition campaigns led to widespread destruction of artifacts and suppression of associated beliefs (Chen 2024). Despite this disruption, oral storytelling and selective preservation within households sustained fragments of memory. As Professor Lin Qiaoling from Sun Yat-sen University explains, “Elders quietly maintained these traditions by embedding them in folk proverbs and seasonal customs, even when the sculptures themselves were removed” (personal communication, April 2, 2025).

After 2008, when Leizhou stone dogs were officially recognized as national intangible cultural heritage, a strategic revival emerged. Cultural memory was reconstructed through school curricula, museum exhibitions, tourism, and creative industries (Li & Campbell, 2019; Xu, 2023; Chen, 2024; Arsenijević & Perić, 2025). Dr. Huang Yixuan, curator at the Zhanjiang Folk Culture Museum, noted, “It’s not just about preserving objects; it’s about reactivating their meaning. We design exhibitions to link ancestral beliefs to modern identity narratives” (personal communication, May 10, 2025). This dynamic process reflects what Assmann (2011) and Halbwachs (1992) describe as the layering and reactivation of collective memory—where traditions adapt, endure, or are reinterpreted through political shifts, generational change, and institutional intervention.

4.3 Modernization and heritage commodification: impacts on the identity and sustainability of Leizhou Stone Dog craftsmanship

Modernization and commercialization have created a paradoxical dynamic in the preservation of Leizhou stone dog craftsmanship. On the one hand, tourism development and state-led heritage policies have increased the visibility and economic viability of the tradition, fostering renewed local pride and cultural awareness. On the other hand, these same forces risk undermining the authenticity and spiritual significance of the sculptures, as market-driven aesthetics begin to take precedence over ritual meaning and craftsmanship values. As one community member explained, *“Modernization has both helped and harmed. It brings visibility through media and tourism, but traditional meaning is fading. Some carvings now prioritize beauty over spiritual function, and many rituals have stopped.”*

In recent years, the aesthetic appearance of Leizhou stone dogs has notably shifted. Traditional carvings emphasized symbolic gestures, material roughness, and ritual placement. By contrast, contemporary reproductions—especially those created for tourism or urban public art—frequently prioritize symmetry, polish, and visual appeal. These shifts are evident in post-2008 sculptures found in parks and cultural districts, which favor accessibility over spiritual function (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3

Post-2008 Leizhou stone dog installed in Zhanjiang's Cultural Plaza.



(Photo by the author, 2024).

Post-2008 Leizhou stone dog installed in Zhanjiang's Cultural Plaza. This sculpture reflects the commodified aesthetic developed after the stone dog tradition was recognized as national intangible cultural heritage in 2008. Its clean lines, pedestal framing, and stylized features contrast with earlier hand-carved, spiritually grounded village guardians.

This sculpture reflects the commodified aesthetic developed after the stone dog tradition was recognized as a national intangible cultural heritage in 2008. Its clean lines, pedestal framing, and stylized features contrast with earlier hand-carved, spiritually grounded village guardians. (Photo by the author, 2024).

A community questionnaire (n. = 102) conducted across multiple villages further highlighted these tensions. While 68% of respondents expressed pride in the official recognition of the stone dog tradition, only 21% believed that younger generations were genuinely interested in continuing the carving practice. This generational gap reflects broader socio-economic challenges such as urban migration, limited artisanal income, and declining intergenerational transmission.

Despite these concerns, participants acknowledged that heritage recognition had spurred positive developments. As one respondent noted, *“It brought a sense of pride back to the village. Young people became more interested, and now some schools include local history about stone dogs in the curriculum.”* Community-driven efforts—such as

local festivals, restoration initiatives, and youth workshops—have contributed to a modest revival in awareness.

When asked about commercialization, respondents expressed cautious optimism. While tourism was recognized as beneficial for raising visibility, many stressed the need to retain symbolic depth and craftsmanship integrity. One elder summarized, *“We need workshops, school education, government support, and financial incentives for young artisans. Documentaries and digital platforms can also help spread awareness.”*

In conclusion, while modernization poses both risks and opportunities for Leizhou stone dog craftsmanship, a balance can be achieved through heritage education, intergenerational engagement, and responsible cultural policy. The challenge lies in safeguarding symbolic authenticity while adapting to evolving socio-economic contexts.

5 DISCUSSION

This study of Leizhou stone dog culture reveals how an enduring regional folk tradition can function as a dynamic interface between historical memory, artistic identity, and contemporary socio-economic change. The findings confirm that the stone dog is not merely a relic of the past but an active symbol of cultural negotiation that has evolved across dynastic transitions, political regimes, and modernization efforts (Zhang & Liu, 2014; Merritt, 2013; Kudinova, 2023).

The study demonstrates that Leizhou stone dogs represent a case of “layered memory”, where symbolic meanings are not static but reshaped according to the sociopolitical demands of each historical period. This echoes the theories of Halbwachs (1992), Assmann (2011), and Nora (1989), who argue that cultural memory is both a repository of tradition and a framework for present reinterpretation. In Leizhou, the transformation of stone dogs from sacred protectors and fertility deities to heritage icons and design motifs illustrates this process of mediated memory. While earlier periods emphasized spiritual function and ritual presence (Huot, 2015; Komissarov & Kudinova, 2020), contemporary reinterpretations are more aligned with heritage branding, tourism, and educational initiatives (Xu, 2023; Chen, 2024).

The impact of modernization, particularly through infrastructure development, media exposure, and tourism, is dual-edged. On one side, state recognition and commodification of heritage have enabled the revitalization of Leizhou stone dog culture,

enhanced local pride, and stimulated cultural tourism (Li & Campbell, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022; Lei et al., 2022). On the other, the findings caution that without mechanisms to safeguard intangible dimensions—such as spiritual function, ritual use, and intergenerational transmission—the tradition risks aesthetic superficiality and cultural dislocation (Smith & Akagawa, 2009; Graham et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2023). The questionnaire results and interview data confirm that younger generations often view the stone dogs as heritage artifacts but are less engaged in traditional carving practices or ritual knowledge, reflecting a gap in craftsmanship sustainability (Fang, 2023; Wang, 2023).

Community-based observations and focus group discussions also shed light on heritage governance challenges. While schools and museums play growing roles in promoting awareness, the absence of institutional support for craft apprenticeship and economic incentives for artisans impedes the organic transmission of skills. This supports broader heritage studies literature that stresses the importance of empowering local stakeholders through co-management and policy alignment (Fusco Girard, 2013; Rahman et al., 2022).

Moreover, the evolving iconographic styles of the stone dogs—from abstract pre-Song forms to refined Ming-Qing sculptures and modern creative adaptations—indicate that folk art is capable of innovation without erasing authenticity (Xiong & Fu, 2022; Hansen, 2014; Samoylovskiy, 2024; Liu, 2024). This reinforces arguments by scholars like Zhang (2024) and Wang (2023) that traditional motifs, when grounded in community narratives and participatory practice, can be meaningfully integrated into contemporary design and education (Wang, 2022; Arsenijević & Perić, 2025).

In sum, the Leizhou stone dog tradition exemplifies a resilient cultural system that negotiates continuity and change through adaptive memory, craft innovation, and evolving community engagement. However, its long-term survival will depend on sustained cultural policies, educational frameworks, and bottom-up revitalization strategies that prioritize both heritage meaning and community ownership (Shen et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024; Li, 2021).

6 CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to investigate the evolving identity, transmission, and sustainability of Leizhou stone dog craftsmanship in the face of modernization and heritage commodification. The approach of the study combined qualitative and quantitative methods—including key informant interviews, focus group discussions, community questionnaires, and direct field observations—to capture diverse perspectives from artisans, cultural custodians, and the wider community.

Findings indicate that modernization has created both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, increased visibility through tourism, educational integration, and cultural policy has renewed local pride and awareness. On the other, there is a risk of diminishing the tradition's spiritual and ritual depth as market demands favor aesthetic over symbolic value. Survey data from 120 respondents show that while 68% take pride in the stone dog's heritage status, only 21% believe younger generations are highly interested in sustaining the craft.

Nonetheless, revival efforts (including festival restorations, storytelling events, and school-based heritage education) highlight community resilience and cultural innovation. Interviewees and focus group participants emphasized the need for strategic preservation, calling for financial support, institutional collaboration, and youth engagement through workshops and digital platforms.

In summary, the study emphasizes that the future of Leizhou stone dog heritage lies in a balanced approach—one that honors traditional meanings while embracing adaptive, participatory models of cultural sustainability. Through integrated methods and grounded community engagement, this research offers both documentation and direction for safeguarding this unique intangible cultural heritage.

7 IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study offers significant implications for cultural heritage preservation, policy development, and community-based education:

- For Cultural Policymakers: The findings highlight the importance of combining official recognition with grassroots engagement. Intangible cultural heritage policies must move beyond symbolic protection to include sustained financial,

educational, and infrastructural support for practitioners and youth.

- **For Educators and Cultural Institutions:** The integration of Leizhou stone dog traditions into school curricula and museum programming can play a vital role in intergenerational transmission. The study underscores the need for culturally responsive pedagogies that link heritage to contemporary values.
- **For Community Stakeholders and NGOs:** Community-driven efforts—such as storytelling festivals, artisan workshops, and local exhibitions—emerge as powerful tools for cultural revitalization. These initiatives should be supported through participatory planning and funding frameworks.
- **For Tourism Development:** While tourism has the potential to promote cultural visibility, the study calls for ethically guided heritage tourism that avoids commodification and respects the spiritual significance of cultural symbols.

8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the study's findings:

- **Geographic Scope:** While the research included multiple villages and districts in Leizhou, the findings may not capture the full diversity of perspectives across the broader Zhanjiang region or among Leizhou diaspora communities.
- **Sample Representation:** Although efforts were made to ensure demographic diversity, certain groups (e.g., youth artisans or women practitioners) may be underrepresented in interviews and focus groups due to accessibility or availability.
- **Time Constraints:** The study was cross-sectional and captures a snapshot of cultural dynamics. Longer-term ethnographic research would provide deeper insights into evolving patterns of memory, identity, and craftsmanship.
- **Potential Response Bias:** In some interviews and surveys, respondents may have provided socially desirable answers, especially when discussing government policies or cultural pride.

9 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To build upon this research, future studies could consider the following directions:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Track changes in community engagement, youth participation, and artisan practices over a multi-year period to better understand long-term impacts of policy and education.
- **Comparative Research:** Compare Leizhou stone dog craftsmanship with other regional or national intangible cultural heritage cases in China or Southeast Asia to identify shared challenges and innovative practices.
- **Youth-Centered Inquiry:** Focus on the perceptions, motivations, and barriers faced by younger generations in continuing cultural practices, using participatory action research methods.
- **Digital Heritage Studies:** Explore the role of digital technologies (e.g., AR/VR, social media, documentary platforms) in documenting, archiving, and reinterpreting traditional practices for wider audiences.
- **Economic Sustainability Models:** Investigate how cooperative models, artisan collectives, or cultural entrepreneurship programs could support the economic viability of traditional craftsmanship without sacrificing authenticity.

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Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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