

The Living Inheritance of Li Ethnic Patterns, Paper-Cutting, and Brocade Craftsmanship in Contemporary Hainan: A Study of Sustainable Transmission

Tianzi Yao

College of Fine Arts, Hainan Normal University, Haikou, China
3947558783@qq.com

Abstract. The transition of traditional Li textile techniques from UNESCO's List in Need of Urgent Safeguarding to the Representative List in late 2024 marks a crucial juncture in Indigenous heritage discourse. This paper examines the "living inheritance" of Li patterns, paper-cutting, and brocade within the tension between modernization and cultural authenticity. Through a material analysis of the Qing-dynasty "Five Dragons Emerging from the Sea" dragon-quilt and an empirical study of the "University-Industry-Inheritor" nexus at Hainan Normal University, the research identifies generational rupture, economic marginalization, and semiotic thinning. Transcending static preservation, this paper puts forward a multi-dimensional framework, encompassing policy empowerment, pedagogical transmission, and institutional innovation, to cultivate the endogenous capacity of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The findings suggest that sustainable inheritance requires a "living nature" approach between symbolic integrity and market transformation to keep Li craftsmanship as a living practice.

Keywords: Li paper-cutting, Li brocade, living inheritance, intangible cultural heritage, market-oriented transformation

1. Introduction and literature review

On December 5, 2024, the traditional Li textile, dyeing, weaving, and embroidery techniques were successfully transferred from the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, signifying that their cultural and artistic value has received high-level international recognition. Concurrently, the Hainan Provincial Government promulgated the "Measures for the Protection and Management of Traditional Li Settlement Cultural Heritage in Hainan Province," which officially came into effect on December 1, 2024. This legislation establishes mechanisms for the investigation and monitoring, revitalization and utilization, and public participation concerning Li settlement cultural heritage at the institutional level. It also explicitly proposes specific measures such as promoting the integration of intangible cultural heritage with tourism, conducting intangible cultural heritage education in schools, and strengthening digital preservation, thereby providing local policy support for the inheritance of Li craftsmanship. Li brocade, paper-cutting, and pattern systems serve as living

cultural fossils passed down through generations of the Li people. With unique techniques such as tie-dyeing and double-sided embroidery and iconic works like dragon quilts, they carry the ethnic group's historical memory, ecological concepts, and identity. As early as 2009, these were inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List, becoming one of the core identifiers of Hainan ethnic culture. The imperative for Li heritage preservation is anchored in two intersecting realities. Spatially, the fact that over 95% of the Li population is concentrated in Hainan renders the province not merely a site of settlement, but the definitive cultural domain of the ethnic group. Anthropologically, the Li occupy a foundational position as Hainan's earliest inhabitants. In the province's multi-ethnic mosaic—comprising Li, Miao, and Hui—Li culture functions as the primary "autochthonous signifier" (identity marker). Consequently, the transmission of their weaving and paper-cutting techniques is less concerned with the preservation of an ancient craft and more focused on the maintenance of the ethnic group itself [1].

Under the impact of modernization, this traditional craft, once deeply integrated into the daily production and life of the Li people, is facing the predicament of a continuously shrinking inheritance ecology. On the one hand, the younger generation no longer relies on traditional skills for livelihood; the lengthy learning period and low economic returns of brocade weaving and paper-cutting create a disincentive, exacerbating the trend of an aging inheritor population. On the other hand, mechanized production is gradually infiltrating the field, leading to increasingly prominent issues such as the simplification of techniques and the dissolution of the cultural connotations of patterns. Although the "Li brocade craze" has seen some resurgence in recent years alongside the integration of culture and tourism and the development of cultural and creative products, fragmented dissemination and short-sighted commercialization struggle to genuinely reverse the current state of generational discontinuity and declining craftsmanship.

Existing research on the inheritance of Li craftsmanship has primarily been conducted from the following perspectives:

Scholarly discourse on Li craftsmanship has historically oscillated between three aspects. Initial research focused heavily on semiotic representation, decoding motifs like the "frog" or "coconut tree" as expressions of tropical animism and fertility worship. While these studies effectively mapped the Li cosmology, they often treated patterns as static icons rather than evolving social texts. A second, more pragmatic strand of scholarship has scrutinized the socio-economic viability of traditional production models, noting the inherent friction between the labor-intensive "household-apprenticeship" system and the rapid tempo of globalized markets. Finally, sites like the Binglanggu Cultural Park have become focal points for debating culture-tourism integration. While Binglanggu offers a platform for "productive protection," critics argue that such models risk "staged authenticity" and the commodification of ethnic symbols [2]. This paper seeks to bridge these perspectives by proposing a framework that treats market transformation not as a threat to authenticity, but as a necessary vehicle for its contemporary survival.

2. Core characteristics of Li patterns and craftsmanship

2.1. Symbolic narrative

The Li pattern system is organized around four motif families: anthropomorphic figures, animals, plants, and geometric designs. Among them, figure patterns, known as "ancestral ghost patterns," serve as important symbols for the five Li dialect subgroups to distinguish clans and inherit lineage culture. Frog patterns, often arranged in continuous diamond formations, are core totems of the Li people, representing totem worship, ancestor sacrifice, and prayers for fertility [3]. They also act as

markers of identity in funeral ceremonies [4]. The frog totem comes from the animist belief of the Li people, who associate frogs with reproduction and abundance, while the repeated diamond shape visually expresses the cycle of life. Deer patterns draw on Hainan's classic "Deer Turning Its Head" legend. Abstract triangular structures symbolize antlers, condensing memories of migration, origin, and harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Coconut tree patterns, shown through vertical lines, reflect the agrarian civilization and land attachment of the Li people. Sun, moon, and star patterns, in concentric circles and arcs, embed the Li cosmic view into textile art.

The textual record on Li textiles runs deeper than the modern reader expects. The Hou Han shu chapter on Southern Barbarians reports that, near the end of Emperor Wu's reign, the prefect of Zhuya, Sun Xing of Kuaiji, levied wide-width cloth (广幅布) as tribute—and that the islanders, no longer bearing the corvée, attacked the commandery and killed the prefect. Modern museum scholarship reads this guangfu bu as the technical ancestor of the Qing dragon-quilt. The Qianlong-era Li qi ji wen (黎岐纪闻) [5], compiled in the 1760s–1770s by Zhang Qingchang while serving as magistrate of Ding'an, gives the most detailed late-imperial description of Li weaving still extant: Li women, he writes, would gather kapok pods from mountain trees, card the fibre with bamboo bows, draw out yarn by hand and foot, dye it red and black, mix in mountain hemp and traded threads, and weave the result into the cloth they called "jibei" (吉贝); for finer work, they would split mountain hemp, weave plain cloth, dye it black with bark juice, and embroider on it with five-coloured floss—the cloth then known as Li bu (黎布). The same passage describes a back-strap loom in technical detail: the warp ends were fixed by two small round rods, one tied to a tree and the other strapped around the weaver's waist, the foot pressing the rods apart to tension the warp before the weft was passed. That is, in essence, the loom still in use among elderly Run weavers in Baisha today—"there is craft in it of their own," Zhang concludes, "yi zi you jiang xin yan" (亦自有匠心焉).

Variation in pattern marks social difference too. The five major Li dialect groups—Ha, Qi, Run, Sai, and Meifu—each carry their own pattern repertoire and stylistic preference. Ha brocade favours full-bodied human-figure and animal motifs in vivid colour. Qi brocade exaggerates the human figure and records hunting, dance, and courtship. Run, concentrated in Baisha Li Autonomous County, is famous for two things: dragon motifs on female garments—read as a survival of dragon totemism—and the double-sided embroidery on the through-the-head tunic (guanshou fu). Sai centres its compositions on frog and human-frog motifs, especially on skirt body and hem, and shows the heaviest Han stylistic influence on cut and closure. Meifu is the smallest dialect group, perhaps four percent of the Li population, concentrated in Dongfang and Changjiang; its trademark technique is tie-dyeing the warp before weaving (zaran)—a sequence in which the ikat-style pattern is fixed in the yarn before the loom is touched. Lévi-Strauss's reading of totemism is useful here: patterns operate as social texts that record relations, mark hierarchy, and become symbols by which subgroups distinguish themselves. The compositional rule of Li brocade—figures before objects, with anthropomorphic forms at the centre—reflects what Zhou and Liang have called the Li humanistic survival wisdom [6].

2.2. The dragon quilt: a single object read closely

The Hainan Provincial Museum's Five Dragons Emerging from the Sea dragon-quilt, dated to the Qing, is one of the museum's published top ten treasures and the most photographed Li textile in the province. The piece measures 176 centimetres by 116 centimetres. It is composed of three loom-width panels stitched together, a structural feature dictated by the narrow web a Li back-strap loom can produce; what looks like one cloth is in fact three. The ground is dense plain weave; the figures

are surface-embroidered in coloured silk floss—yellow, white, green, brown—drawn through the woven base after the cloth came off the loom.

The composition follows a pattern grammar developed across two centuries of Qing court-influenced Li dragon-quilts. A continuous swastika band frames a rectangular field; inside that field, five dragons coil through wave-like cloud, three rising and two descending, the central dragon facing the viewer in full regalia. Around the central field, the embroiderer has placed magpies on plum (xique deng mei, the rebus for joy at the threshold), a vase paired with a quail (ping-an, peace), and lingzhi fungi at top and bottom corners as auspicious finishing motifs. The colour logic is deliberate: yellow reserved for the central dragon and the dragons' spines (the imperial chromatic, here borrowed and naturalised), white for cloud edges, green for sea-foliage, brown as the connective and bordering tone. The piece reads, that is, as both a Li women's dye-and-needle tour de force and as a knowing translation of Han court iconography into a Li compositional logic. Cloth of this register was paid in tribute, used in Li mortuary ritual, and given at marriage; it was never strictly secular. The corresponding piece in the Hainan Provincial Museum of Nationalities at Wuzhishan, the Twin Phoenixes Saluting the Sun and Twin Lions Playing with a Ball (188 by 127 centimetres, also Qing, three panels, indigo-black ground, palette of black, brown, blue, yellow, white), uses the same grammar with a different vocabulary. Read in this much detail, neither piece is decoration. Each is a paragraph in a long argument about who the Li were and what their cloth could say.

2.3. Technical interdependence

Paper-cutting and brocade form a single, indivisible technical chain. Li paper-cutting, on hemp or bark paper, abstracts natural objects into geometric symbols and then becomes the working draft for brocade. Translating the paper-cut into woven cloth requires adapting it to warp and weft. Curves break down into straight or folded lines. Circles become geometric units. Plain weave, twill weave, and other techniques can carry them only if the paper-cut has been reduced to a grid the loom can read.

Technique itself contributes to meaning. Tie-dye, especially the warp-tie-dye unique to Meifu weavers, produces blurred, naturally graded textures that no embroidered patch can imitate. Double-sided embroidery, the Run speciality, makes the pattern read identically from front and back, so the symbolic content is delivered intact from any angle—a property valuable in ritual cloth that is folded, draped, and reversed. The implication for inheritance is unavoidable: simplify the technique, and you also reduce what the pattern can say.

2.4. Ecological fit

The colour system tracks the tropical environment. Black and indigo, the foundation, come from indigo plants that grow locally; the pigments offer practical sun and dirt resistance, and they speak, more abstractly, to a yin-yang harmony. Reds, yellows, and whites come from cinnabar, gardenia fruit, and similar natural sources. The result is vivid yet contained—never gaudy.

This is the take-from-nature, work-with-nature principle—qu zhi yu zi ran. It carries an ecological worldview, tian ren he yi, heaven and humanity as one system. It is one of the parts of the craft contemporary inheritance cannot afford to lose. Collectively, narrative function, technical interdependence, and ecological fit constitute the essence of the craft. Hence, the effective inheritance of Li craft does not merely entail the preservation of techniques. It also involves the preservation of cultural identity, ecological comprehension, and ethnic spirit.

3. The dilemmas of contemporary inheritance, with comparison

3.1. The inheritance dilemma

Declining economic value is the underlying driver. Industrial textiles have largely replaced hand-woven Li cloth in daily life, and the practical and paid value of brocade has thinned out accordingly. Inputs no longer match outputs. The number of skilled brocade weavers fell from roughly 50,000 in the 1950s to fewer than 1,000 by 2009, with most over 70. Fewer than 200 still mastered dyeing and embroidery. Only five could do double-sided embroidery. Almost no one could carry out the dragon quilt process from end to end. The transmission chain is broken in places—not bent, broken. The 2020 reconstruction project at the Hainan Provincial Museum, which assembled forty-one Qing and Republican dragon-quilts from eleven public and private collections for a single exhibition called "Hundred Plants and Thousand Flowers Embroidered on the Brocade," was in part a forensic exercise: scholars and inheritors reverse-engineered weaving and embroidery sequences from objects whose makers had long since died, because no one alive carried the full process in working memory.

The generational gap follows directly. The oral-instruction, master-apprentice model has fractured under modern conditions, and the older custom of teaching only women has narrowed the inheritor pool further [7]. Young Li tend to look for work in cities, and the long, low-paid apprenticeship of a traditional craft has limited appeal. Government support is uneven: subsidies are small, targeted training and start-up support for young inheritors are thin, and the talent drain continues. Among the masters of core techniques, the aging trend is now visible to anyone who attends a workshop.

Dissolution of cultural identity is the deeper effect. Patterns drift away from belief and ritual contexts and start to behave like decoration—the cultural core erodes [4]. Globalized fashion and mainstream popular culture have reshaped Li youth taste and values. Primary and secondary schools rarely teach the craft. The interest of younger Li in their own textile tradition has correspondingly faded. The average age of the inheritors who command the rarer techniques—double-sided brocade, tie-dye—is over sixty. Nationwide, fewer than twenty artisans can fully reconstruct the full set of Li clothing-weaving techniques. The mnemonic verses and cultural meanings attached to many patterns are now hard to transmit in their entirety. The endogenous engine of identity-and-skill inheritance is running thin.

3.2. Horizontal comparison with other intangible cultural heritage crafts

3.2.1. Common dilemmas

Li craft and other ICH—Suzhou embroidery, Miao silverwork, Yixing purple-clay pottery—share the same modern conditions. Traditional inheritance ecologies are disrupted. Hand production fits awkwardly into the market economy. Inheritor cohorts age and thin. Intellectual property protection is weak. Suzhou embroidery is also losing young practitioners and depends on a small number of senior masters for its core techniques. Miao silverwork is being squeezed by mechanized substitutes that erode the value of the hand-made. Yixing purple-clay faces both raw-material shortage and over-commercial exploitation. None of this is unique to the Li case; it reflects a shared structural pressure on craft heritage. What is more particular about Li craft is that its religious and ritual functions are stronger than those of Suzhou embroidery or Miao silverwork. A purely market-driven

approach that works for those crafts cannot simply be lifted onto the Li case—holistic safeguarding is required [8].

3.2.2. Differences and adaptability analysis

Models that have worked elsewhere do not transfer cleanly to Hainan. The differences are economic, cultural, and structural. Four points are worth marking.

Economy. Suzhou embroidery sits in the prosperous Jiangnan region, with a developed high-end consumer market. Single pieces can fetch several million RMB, and a high-end customization plus brand route is workable. Miao silverwork is in the southwest, where a culture-tourism market is developing and mass-market and derivative products have room to grow. The Li regions in Hainan are less wealthy, and a high-cost customization model would not find buyers in sufficient numbers.

Culture and technique. Suzhou embroidery is prized for fine, realistic representation, which translates well into high-end art and collectibles. Miao silverwork has both ornamental and practical uses, and it suits tourism merchandise. Li craft leans more on cultural narrative and technical integrity—on the symbolic and ritual weight of the patterns. Borrowing the Suzhou or the Miao model would tend to flatten the techniques and loosen the meanings.

Brand. Suzhou embroidery already has a mature regional public brand and high recognition. Miao silverwork is partly there but is hampered by homogenization, uneven quality, simplified techniques, and inferior materials, all of which damage trust. Li craft has the lowest national recognition of the three and lacks both scale and brand structure.

Inheritor structure. Suzhou embroidery has a reasonably full age structure across senior, middle, and junior practitioners, plus a working vocational pipeline and substantial local industrial policy. Miao silverwork has more young and middle-aged practitioners, although core technical transmission remains weak; policy support there leans toward culture-tourism integration. The Li craft inheritor cohort is sharply older and short on successors. Targeted policy support in the relevant ethnic regions still needs to be made more effective.

4. Toward a living inheritance pathway

To achieve sustainable inheritance, we must break the dual dilemma between rigid museum-style preservation and excessive commercialization, and build a three-dimensional path supported by institutions, education, and the market.

4.1. Institutional support: infrastructure over subsidy

The market often overlooks the cultural and ecological value of Li craftsmanship, leading to low incomes for inheritors and difficulties in sustaining traditional skills. Simple financial subsidies can hardly support the long-term development of the craft. The implementation of the Measures for the Protection and Management of Traditional Li Settlement Cultural Heritage in Hainan Province in 2024 provides institutional support for inheriting Li craftsmanship, emphasizing the integration of intangible cultural heritage with rural revitalization, tourism development, and digital preservation.

On this basis, it is necessary to establish a standardized system for raw material supply, cooperative production, and brand marketing to reduce production costs and market risks for weavers. The construction of "Li Craft Cultural Villages" should prioritize real production and inheritance functions rather than symbolic performances. It is crucial to respect the autonomy of

inheritors and avoid the alienation of cultural heritage caused by excessive government intervention [2].

4.2. Pedagogical intervention: the HNU case and the value-chain asymmetry

Hainan Normal University has formed a mature platform for education and practice in Li brocade. Since 2021, its Design and Service Platform has gathered outstanding designers and launched a series of innovative products. The establishment of the Li Brocade Industry Alliance in 2024 has further promoted connections among universities, inheritors, and the market.

However, the current model shows an obvious imbalance in the value chain: designers and operators gain most of the benefits, while frontline weavers remain in a weak position. To achieve living inheritance, a benefit-sharing mechanism must be established to recognize the intellectual property rights of inheritors and improve their business capabilities. Primary education should strengthen the infiltration of Li culture to help young people build cultural identity at an early age.

4.3. Managing symbolic value: recognition and market interfacing

The core value of Li brocade lies in its cultural symbolism and ritual significance, which have been recognized by UNESCO, museums, and other institutions. Social support such as subsidies and full-time positions affirms the value of traditional craftsmanship. Meanwhile, a sound evaluation and exit mechanism should be established to link honors with practical inheritance work [2].

In the process of marketization, we must avoid simplifying and hollowing out cultural connotations. The "Hundred Plants and Thousand Flowers Embroidered on the Brocade" exhibition at Hainan Provincial Museum comprehensively displays the historical and artistic value of dragon quilts, raising public understanding of Li craftsmanship. Digital tools such as VR and short videos can record the entire weaving process, enhance public experience, and build a regional public brand with authenticity certification to resist the impact of mechanized products.

5. Conclusion

Living inheritance, for Li patterns, paper-cutting, and brocade, comes down to one thing: holding cultural identity and market-oriented transformation together. The challenges are partly shared with other ICH—aging cohorts, weak market fit, fragile transmission—and partly specific to Li culture, the regional economy, and the local inheritance ecology. Eroding identity, declining economic value, and the inheritor gap reinforce one another. That knot is the central obstacle to any living inheritance project. The comparison with Suzhou embroidery, Miao silverwork, and Yixing pottery confirms the same lesson from the other side: no model can simply be transplanted; the path has to be local.

The five-part framework offered here—policy empowerment, educational transmission, institutional innovation, creative communication, and brand building—is a local path of that kind. Its purpose is to develop endogenous capacity, not to deepen dependence on government support. With the recent UNESCO Representative List inscription, Li craft has an opening it did not have before. What practice now needs is a willingness to adjust as conditions and feedback change, and a continued search for the working balance between tradition and modernity.

It is the only way Li patterns and craftsmanship will keep living force in the years ahead—and, in keeping it, contribute to cultural confidence, rural revitalization, and the quality development of cultural industries. Belief, identity, and technique form one system in Li craft. Living inheritance is what happens when the next embroiderer who picks up the needle still understands why the central

dragon faces forward, why the swastika band runs around the field, and why three loom-widths of cloth, not one, make a single quilt. Returning to community, returning to daily life, returning to practice [9]—the formula is not ours to invent; it is theirs to keep.

References

- [1] Feng, J. Z. (2015). On the cultural redemption function of Li brocade. *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, 33(3), 137-144.
- [2] Tao, W. & Cai, H. H. (2022). A review of Chinese intangible cultural heritage research since the 21st century. *Tropical Geography*, 42(5), 721-734.
- [3] Lin, Y. H. (2012). The influence of Li ancestor worship on the "human figure pattern" in Li brocade art from Hainan. *Ethnic Art Studies*, 25(4), 112-117.
- [4] Sun, H. L. & Jiao, Y. Q. (2010). A study on the fertility worship in frog patterns of Li brocade. *Journal of Hainan University (Humanities & Social Sciences)*, 28(3), 25-30.
- [5] Zhang, Q. C. (1760s–1770s). *Li qi ji wen* [Records of the Li frontier]. Reprinted in *Guangdong lidai fangzhi jicheng*: Qiongzhou fu bu. Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House.
- [6] Zhou, T. & Liang, H. E. (2020). Three dimensions of Li people's survival wisdom as seen from the construction of "human figure patterns". *Journal of South-Central Minzu University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 40(4), 71-77.
- [7] Zhou, X. Y. (2024). Identity shift and identification of Li brocade skill inheritors. *Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation*, 8(8), 1-4.
- [8] Wang, S. H. & Liao, R. (2008). Intangible cultural heritage protection from the perspective of industrialization. *Journal of Tongji University (Social Science Section)*, 19(1), 107-112.
- [9] Guo, C. X. (2023). From "intangible cultural heritage" to "living heritage". *Northwestern Journal of Ethnology*, 34(2), 102-112.