

Development Ideas for Local Cultural and Creative Products for Leizhou Guniang Ballad from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization

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Abstract: As a national-level intangible cultural heritage inscribed in 2021, Leizhou Guniang Ballad is a dialect-based talking-singing art from the Leizhou Peninsula, Guangdong. Under the current policy of ICH revitalization and rural cultural revitalization, its survival faces challenges such as aging inheritors, shrinking audiences, and weak creative transformation. From the perspective of living heritage revitalization, this paper examines the local cultural foundations of Guniang Ballad—its Leizhou dialect, antiphonal singing form, and folk-life connotations—and identifies major shortcomings in existing cultural and creative products, including limited product forms, superficial symbol extraction, and a closed, aging audience. On this basis, it proposes four development paths: scenario-based experiential products that restore song-hall atmosphere; lightweight digital and physical products integrated into daily life; in-situ cultural tourism products linking heritage protection with regional tourism; and youth co-creation projects to cultivate endogenous creative power. The paper argues that only by rooting in local culture and retaining the dialect charm and core artistic spirit while adapting to contemporary aesthetics and consumption can Guniang Ballad be transformed from a protected heritage into a participatory, consumable, and communicable living culture, thereby supporting its sustainable inheritance and local cultural-economic development.

Keywords: Leizhou Guniang Ballad; Intangible cultural heritage revitalization; Cultural and creative products; Living inheritance

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1. Introduction

As a national-level intangible cultural heritage (ICH) inscribed in 2021, Leizhou Guniang Ballad is an indigenous talking-singing art fostered by the Leizhou dialect on the southwestern coast of Guangdong, carrying the life wisdom and aesthetic memory of generations of peninsula residents. UNESCO's 2003

Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes that revitalization through creative transformation and community participation is a core approach to sustaining living heritage beyond mere documentation ^[1]. In China, the national cultural development strategy of the 14th Five-Year Plan also identifies ICH-inspired cultural and creative industries as a key driver for both heritage protection and regional economic growth, with successful cases ranging from Kunqu opera-themed stationery to Suzhou embroidery-inspired fashion demonstrating the commercial and cultural potential of this model. In recent years, however, with the passing of veteran performing artists and the disconnection of young audiences born and raised in a Mandarin-dominated media environment, the inheritance space of Guniang Ballad has kept narrowing. The traditional mode of oral and personal teaching, which relied on village song halls and intergenerational apprenticeship, can barely adapt to the contemporary cultural communication environment shaped by short videos and digital sociality. Against the policy background of ICH revitalization and rural cultural revitalization, developing context-sensitive cultural and creative products serves as a vital path to bridge traditional art and modern life ^[2]. It can not only inject new communication vitality into Guniang Ballad and expand its audience base, but also provide content support for Leizhou's local cultural industry and contribute to the diversified development of the peninsula's tourism economy.

However, the cultural and creative transformation of Leizhou Guniang Ballad is still in its very initial stage, lagging far behind mature ICH creative practices in the Pearl River Delta. Most relevant products remain at the level of performance audio-visual materials and simple printed products produced for official cultural events, failing to fully tap into the core of local culture, and hardly meeting the consumption preferences and aesthetic habits of young groups ^[3]. In this context, combined with the local cultural context of the Leizhou Peninsula and field observations of its current creative industry, this paper discusses systematic and operable ideas for developing Guniang Ballad cultural and creative products, so as to provide practical references for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage in less-developed regional contexts.

2. Local cultural foundation for the development of Leizhou Guniang Ballad cultural and creative products

The cultural and creative development of Guniang Ballad cannot be separated from the local cultural soil that gave birth to it, and its unique artistic features and folk connotations rooted in peninsula life are exactly the core competitiveness of related products that distinguish them from homogeneous cultural commodities.

First, the Leizhou dialect has unique symbolic value as a linguistic cultural marker. Guniang Ballad is sung entirely in the Leizhou dialect, whose eight-tone phonetic system—including four level tones and four entering tones—shapes its unique rhyming rules, cadence patterns, and singing charm ^[4]. As a branch of the Min Chinese language family, the Leizhou dialect has been formed over centuries of geographical isolation on the peninsula, retaining many ancient phonetic and lexical features from medieval China and serving as a “living fossil” of regional language and cultural identity ^[5]. For local people, the dialect is not merely a communication tool but a carrier of collective memory and shared emotion; hearing Guniang Ballad sung in the native dialect immediately evokes a sense of cultural belonging. As both the carrier of performance and the most distinctive identifier of Leizhou culture, the dialect boasts strong regional recognizability and constitutes the core trait that distinguishes Guniang Ballad from other folk song cultural and creative products across the country.

Second, the antiphonal singing form has inherent interactive advantages that fit contemporary experiential consumption. Different from the solo form of most folk songs, Guniang Ballad centers on the “antiphonal singing in song halls” mode: two performers sing in turn and compose lyrics impromptu according to given themes, which is both intellectually competitive and artistically entertaining ^[6-7]. In traditional village settings, song hall activities held on festivals or slack farming seasons are open to all villagers rather than limited to professional artists; audiences often join in the chorus or even step forward to take turns singing, creating a highly participatory and immersive cultural atmosphere rather than a passive spectator experience. Such interactive attributes, which align perfectly with the global trend of experiential cultural consumption, are naturally suitable for developing immersive and participatory cultural and creative products.

Third, it is deeply embedded in folk connotations of daily life, providing rich content resources for creative derivation. Guniang Ballad permeates all aspects of life on the Leizhou Peninsula, including weddings, birthday celebrations, spring festivals, deity worship ceremonies, and village-level moral persuasion gatherings. For example, the Dapeng Song is specially performed at festival shed-building ceremonies to pray for good harvests and communal peace, while the Exhortation Song is sung at weddings and birthday banquets to convey moral teachings about filial piety, diligence, and harmony to younger generations ^[8]. Its lyrics cover historical allusions, agricultural production knowledge, family ethics, and worldly wisdom, filled with local people’s sincere life emotions and plain value orientations ^[9]. It can not only arouse deep cultural resonance among local residents, but also serve as a vivid window for outsiders to perceive the humanistic landscape of Leizhou Peninsula.

3. Current shortcomings in the development of Guniang Ballad cultural and creative products

Judging from the actual situation in Leizhou and Suixi surveyed between 2026 and 2027, there are still obvious weaknesses in the cultural and creative transformation of Guniang Ballad, which restrict its revitalization and dissemination.

First, product forms are limited, with a low industrial level and weak market orientation. A field survey of scenic spots, cultural stores, bookstores, and e-commerce platforms shows that Guniang Ballad-related products are barely available in commercial channels. At present, most related products are government-led performance videos, album CDs, and promotional brochures, which focus on public welfare communication and are mostly distributed for free at official cultural events. There are very few market-oriented consumer cultural and creative products that can enter daily consumption scenarios such as stationery, home decor, digital entertainment, or fashion accessories. The industrial chain is incomplete: there is no professional design team, no stable production system, and no mature sales channel, resulting in an extremely low industrial conversion rate of heritage resources.

Second, cultural symbol extraction stays superficial, lacking core cultural expression and product differentiation. Compared with mature ICH creative products in Guangdong, such as Cantonese opera-themed cosmetics or Chaozhou embroidery-themed luxury accessories, Guniang Ballad-related designs rarely dig into its core cultural connotations. Most relevant designs simply extract superficial visual elements such as traditional costumes and headwear, printing them directly on notebooks or T-shirts, but fail to touch core features like the dialect language, antiphonal singing mechanism, and folk cultural connotations. As a result,

the products are highly homogeneous and replaceable; consumers can hardly tell the difference between Guniang Ballad products and those of other folk music forms, and the products can hardly reflect the unique cultural value and spiritual temperament of Guniang Ballad.

Third, the audience circle is closed, with limited communication power and insufficient appeal to young people. Statistics from local short-video accounts and offline performance audiences show that over 75% of viewers of Guniang Ballad content are aged over 50, and most are long-term local residents. Existing products and activities mostly target local middle-aged and elderly groups as well as a small circle of ICH enthusiasts, failing to effectively reach young people aged 18 to 30, who account for less than 20% of the total audience^[10]. There is also a lack of communication carriers adapted to new media platforms that can go beyond the Leizhou Peninsula, and the number of followers from outside the region is negligible. As a result, the cultural influence of Guniang Ballad has long been confined to a narrow regional scope, making it difficult to form sustainable inheritance vitality driven by market and social forces.

4. Development paths of local cultural and creative products for Leizhou Guniang Ballad

In response to the above problems, the cultural and creative development of Guniang Ballad should be rooted in local conditions, closely follow its unique artistic features and adapt to contemporary consumption habits, and steadily advance the creative transformation from four interconnected dimensions.

First, build scenario-based experiential cultural and creative products that restore the authentic song hall atmosphere. Relying on local cultural tourism scenarios such as Leizhou Ancient City, Suixi Confucius Cultural City, and key beautiful village demonstration sites, build small “mini song hall” interactive experience spaces to restore the singing atmosphere of traditional village song halls^[11]. Specifically, 15–20 minute experience sessions can be set up in core tourist areas such as the ancient city’s cultural pedestrian street, with inheritors demonstrating classic antiphonal singing first and then guiding visitors to try simple impromptu singing with given daily themes. Interactive activities such as “lyrics improvisation challenges” can be added to increase engagement, with small themed souvenirs awarded to participants. For the night economy, mobile mini song halls can be set up at weekend night markets, combining singing performances with local snack experiences. Lightweight folk experience programs can also be developed for family tourists, combining Guniang Ballad antiphonal singing with Leizhou wedding customs and traditional rice cake making, allowing consumers to understand the cultural background of Guniang Ballad in immersive scenes rather than simply watching performances.

Second, develop lightweight digital and physical cultural and creative products that integrate into daily life. In line with the characteristics of new media communication, produce lightweight digital products such as Guniang Ballad-themed emojis, dialect ringtones, and background music for short videos, and extract classic persuasive lyrics and characteristic tones to fit contemporary social scenarios. For instance, classic witty lines and moral exhortations from ballads can be made into emoji packs suitable for daily social chat, and short audio clips can be used as personalized ringtones or short-video background music. A mini WeChat program can also be developed for dialect lyric-filling games, lowering the threshold for young users to engage with the art form. In terms of physical products, launch small-volume items such as Guniang Ballad lyric bookmarks, dialect lyric keychains, canvas bags, and fridge magnets, each printed with a QR code

linking to classic singing segments. These products integrate interesting Leizhou dialect lyrics with daily necessities, lower the consumption threshold for young groups, and integrate ICH symbols into daily life in a subtle and natural way.

Third, promote in-situ cultural tourism integrated products that link heritage protection with regional tourism development. Link the rural tourism and coastal tourism resources of the Leizhou Peninsula, launch short “ICH experience tour” routes, and connect Guniang Ballad inheritance bases, veteran artists’ village song hall experiences with rural and coastal tourism on the peninsula. A typical one-day route can include watching authentic village performances in the morning, experiencing antiphonal singing at a heritage base at noon, and visiting coastal scenic spots and tropical fruit farms in the afternoon, creating a comprehensive cultural and leisure experience. Develop “Guniang Ballad + local specialty” souvenir sets, and integrate Guniang Ballad visual elements and audio QR codes into the packaging of local specialties such as Leizhou brown sugar, dried seafood, red earth pottery, and tropical fruit preserves. Consumers can scan the code to listen to classic singing segments related to the product theme, endowing cultural and creative products with both practical functions and cultural added value.

Fourth, carry out youth co-creation projects to cultivate endogenous creative power. Cooperate with design and music majors of local universities in Zhanjiang such as Lingnan Normal University and Zhanjiang University of Science and Technology, jointly set up ICH creative practice bases on campus, and hold Guniang Ballad cultural and creative design competitions regularly. Encourage young people to approach traditional symbols from perspectives such as trendy toys, blind boxes, street fashion, and illustration design with contemporary aesthetics, and provide incubation support for winning works to enter the market. Support young musicians and independent creators to adapt Guniang Ballad with modern arrangement styles such as folk-pop, acoustic, and light rock, produce secondary creation materials for short videos, and expand communication via social platforms such as Bilibili and Douyin. By giving play to young people’s creativity and discourse power, Guniang Ballad can gain new forms of expression that fit contemporary aesthetics, and young people can transform from passive audiences into active participants and communicators of ICH revitalization.

5. Conclusion

The cultural and creative development of Leizhou Guniang Ballad, in essence, is to enable this ancient folk art to step out of traditional village song halls and integrate into the daily life of contemporary people through creative transformation. In the broader context of rural revitalization and regional cultural confidence building, this transformation carries significance far beyond heritage protection itself: it also injects unique cultural connotation into local tourism and consumer industries, creates new growth points for the peninsula’s economy, and provides a channel for young people to identify with and participate in local culture. In the development process, we must hold fast to the root of local culture, and never sacrifice dialect charm and cultural core to blindly cater to the market or pursue excessive commercialization. On the premise of retaining its core artistic characteristics and cultural spirit, we should turn Guniang Ballad from a “protected heritage” locked in archives and village halls into a consumable, participatory, and communicable living culture through diverse carriers and youthful expressions. Only by taking root in the life soil of the Leizhou Peninsula and adapting to the aesthetics and needs of contemporary people can Guniang Ballad achieve

genuine inheritance in the process of revitalization, and continuously radiate the enduring vitality of local culture to broader audiences inside and outside the peninsula.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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