

Exploring the Convergence of Tradition and Modernity: The Educational Tourism Potential of Suzhou Oil-Paper Umbrella Craftsmanship

Xiao Cong Jiang,^a and Tian Yang Luo^{b,*}

Suzhou oil-paper umbrellas, as a significant part of China's intangible cultural heritage, exemplify the harmonious integration of nature and art through their intricate craftsmanship. These umbrellas are not only functional objects but also cultural symbols, reflecting centuries of traditional skills in bamboo frame making and oil-paper production. However, the preservation of these techniques faces critical challenges, including an aging artisan population, a lack of successors, and insufficient integration of local industries with cultural heritage protection efforts. The current approaches to safeguarding these crafts often focus on superficial aspects, neglecting the core techniques of bamboo processing and paper-making. This editorial considers the cultural value of Suzhou oil-paper umbrella craftsmanship, identifies the challenges in its preservation, and explores revitalization strategies through educational tourism. The research employs a comprehensive analysis of the cultural significance, current preservation efforts, and potential for sustainable development. The main contribution of this study lies in highlighting the potential of educational tourism as a vehicle for cultural heritage conservation and local economic development, providing a framework for the sustainable revitalization of this unique traditional craft.

DOI: [10.15376/biores.20.2.2487-2490](https://doi.org/10.15376/biores.20.2.2487-2490)

Keywords: Oil-paper umbrella; Intangible cultural heritage; Educational tourism; Cultural heritage preservation; Sustainable development

Contact information: a: School of Business, Institute of Vocational Technology, SIP—Suzhou Industrial Park, Suzhou 215123, China; Email: roy@ivt.edu.cn; b: Hezhou University, No.3261 Xiahe Avenue, Babu District, Hezhou City, Guangxi Province, China, Zip Code: 542899;

* Corresponding author: luotianyang@hzxy.edu.cn

UNESCO has consistently highlighted that intangible cultural heritage forms a vital part of global cultural diversity. Its preservation and transmission play a crucial role in sustaining human cultural identity and promoting sustainable development (Deacon *et al.* 2013). Suzhou oil-paper umbrellas, a centuries-old traditional craft, encapsulate the profound heritage of China's intangible cultural legacy. As a unique and evocative artisanal creation, these umbrellas epitomize the harmony of nature and art in Chinese culture. With the integration of cultural and tourism industries, educational tourism centered on Suzhou oil-paper umbrella craftsmanship has reinvigorated efforts to safeguard and promote traditional skills while opening up sustainable pathways for local economic growth and cultural revitalization.

The Unique Appeal of Oil-Paper Umbrella Craftsmanship

The craftsmanship of Suzhou oil-paper umbrellas is renowned for its meticulous attention to detail, especially in the creation of the bamboo frame. High-quality bamboo

species, such as Mao bamboo and water bamboo, are selected for their strength, elasticity, and durability. The bamboo undergoes multiple processes, including soaking, cutting, and shaping into uniform strips. These strips are then carefully assembled into a rib structure, ensuring both balance and durability. The frame consists of a central rib, known as the “top rib,” surrounded by 28 to 36 support ribs. The assembly of these ribs involves intricate techniques to secure them with thin bamboo threads or natural fibers, ensuring a robust and stable structure. The bamboo used for the ribs is selected from high-quality species such as Mao bamboo or water bamboo. These bamboo species are ideal for making umbrella ribs due to their long growth cycle, resilience, and elasticity. After cutting, the bamboo is soaked in water for several days to remove impurities and sugars, preventing pest infestation and mold growth. The bamboo is then split into long strips and carefully shaved into uniform rib shapes using specialized tools. Each rib is carefully smoothed and polished to ensure it is free of splinters and imperfections. The ribs are then assembled into a framework, with a central rib known as the “top rib” and 28 to 36 surrounding ribs called “support ribs.” The support ribs are connected using thin bamboo threads or hemp fibers to form a stable frame, ensuring both balance and durability, as shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. The wooden parts of the umbrella

The canopy of the oil-paper umbrella is traditionally made from high-quality, handmade paper, typically produced from the fibers of rice straw, mulberry bark, or other natural plant fibers. The papermaking process begins with soaking the mulberry bark to soften the fibers. These fibers are then crushed into a fine pulp and placed in a vat. Using a bamboo frame, the pulp is gathered into thin sheets. These sheets are pressed to remove excess water and left to dry naturally. After drying, the paper is carefully shaped into the umbrella’s canopy. The transformation of flat paper into the curved canopy of the oil-paper umbrella is achieved through a combination of material properties and artisanal techniques. After the handmade paper is wetted to increase its flexibility, it is carefully stretched and fitted onto the bamboo frame. As the paper dries, it undergoes differential shrinkage, causing it to conform naturally to the umbrella’s curved shape. To enhance its water

resistance, the paper is coated with multiple layers of tung oil, a plant-based oil. Each layer of oil is allowed to dry before the next one is applied, with the final layer serving as a protective coating. Once the oil has dried, artisans perform final adjustments to ensure the paper is smooth, wrinkle-free, and perfectly fitted to the frame. This step may involve additional trimming and smoothing to achieve a flawless finish, ensuring the canopy retains its form and durability over time.



Fig. 2. The paper part of the umbrella

Challenges and Future Outlook

Despite the promising potential of Suzhou's oil-paper umbrella craftsmanship, several challenges remain in ensuring the long-term preservation of bamboo craftsmanship and papermaking techniques.

- *Aging of artisans and lack of successors:* As traditional artisans age, the absence of interest and participation from younger generations has become a significant issue. The traditional skills involved, such as the precise selection of bamboo, shaping of umbrella ribs, and the detailed papermaking techniques, are at risk of being lost. It is crucial to develop strategies that engage younger generations in these crafts to ensure their preservation and continuation. One promising approach is the development of a vibrant system of ecotourism, which can make careers in traditional arts, such as oil-paper umbrella craftsmanship, trendier and more attractive to young people. By integrating traditional crafts into ecotourism initiatives, young people can experience the cultural and environmental significance of these practices in a dynamic and engaging way. This not only provides a potential career path but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the heritage behind the craft. Moreover, it allows for creative reinterpretations of traditional techniques, attracting those who may not be interested in strictly following the old ways. Such a system could revitalize interest in traditional arts, ensuring their preservation while adapting to contemporary interests.
- *Insufficient engagement with core aspects of the craft:* Many initiatives related to the preservation of Suzhou oil-paper umbrellas focus on superficial experiences, neglecting the intricate processes involved in bamboo processing and papermaking.

These core aspects of the craft are essential for maintaining the umbrella's durability and cultural significance. Efforts should be made to introduce more in-depth, hands-on engagement with both bamboo rib crafting and paper-making techniques, fostering a deeper connection to the heritage behind the craft. It is important to recognize that Suzhou oil-paper umbrellas were originally designed as practical rain gear in ancient China. Therefore, while ensuring the umbrella's durability, it is crucial to restore its practicality and maintain its aesthetic appeal. This dual focus on functionality and beauty not only honors the traditional craftsmanship but also breathes new life into the art of Suzhou oil-paper umbrellas, making them relevant in both historical and contemporary contexts.

- *Limited integration between education and industry:* The integration of intangible cultural heritage with contemporary industries remains insufficient. This is particularly evident in the preservation of bamboo processing and papermaking techniques, which require market-driven support to ensure their economic sustainability. Without appropriate incentives, artisans may struggle to maintain the high-quality standards necessary for producing authentic oil-paper umbrellas. A more integrated framework connecting industry and educational initiatives could help sustain these traditional skills.
- *Policy support and collaborative resource allocation:* The preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, including bamboo and paper techniques, requires long-term, clearly defined policy support. Governments, cultural institutions, and local enterprises must collaborate to provide the necessary resources, such as funding, materials, and training opportunities, to support local artisans and ensure the transmission of these skills to the next generation.

The future sustainability of Suzhou's oil-paper umbrella craftsmanship relies heavily on integrated efforts across multiple sectors. Furthermore, the collaboration between local artisans, cultural institutions, and businesses can facilitate the preservation and promotion of this traditional craft. Through effective resource integration and innovative approaches, the preservation and promotion of Suzhou's oil-paper umbrella craftsmanship can serve as a model for cultural heritage conservation and local economic development.

Funding Statement

This research was supported by the Philosophy and Social Science Research Project of Jiangsu Universities. [No. 2021SJA1476]; Research Team for Business Vocational Education and Industrial Economic Development at SIPIVT, China [No. 20240103124].

References Cited

- Deacon, H., Dondolo, L., Mrubata, M., and Prosalendis, S. (2013). "Intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development: A comparative analysis," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19(3), 325-336. DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2013.798624