ACCSCIENCE PUBLISHING

Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Authenticity in crisis: Structural tensions and challenges in the heritage preservation of Dongyang woodcarving

Xiaotian Guo[1,2]* and Faridah Sahari[1]

[1]Department of Design Technology, Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

[2]Art Design College, Zhejiang Guangsha Vocational and Technical University of Construction, Dongyang, Zhejiang, China

Abstract

Dongyang woodcarving (DYWC) is a form of Chinese intangible cultural heritage that is experiencing an authenticity crisis due to the pressures of industrialisation, commercialisation and spatial transformation. Although previous literature has explored heritage preservation and craft commodification, little attention has been given to how authenticity is constructed and how disjunctures emerge through the integrated semiotic, technical, and spatial aspects. To address this gap, the current study adopts a qualitative case study design, grounded in field observations, 16 semi-structured interviews, and NVivo-aided thematic analysis. The results identify three interrelated threats to authenticity: symbolic drift, aesthetic simplification through the market, and contextual displacement. These processes undermine the semiotic and cultural intelligibility of DYWC. The article is grounded in heritage authenticity theory and semiotic analysis, and it suggests a three-dimensional safeguarding framework including technical integrity, symbolic reinforcement, and contextual re-embedding. This framework presents a new, integrative methodology that goes beyond material preservation to the maintenance of the cultural logic of craft practices. The results enhance wider discussions on the topic of intangible heritage in showing that authenticity is a structurally negotiated concept and offer useful insights to policymakers and heritage professionals on how to address comparable challenges in culturally embedded craft traditions.

Keywords: Authenticity; Intangible cultural heritage; Symbolic drift; Semiotic heritage; Digital–analogue synergy; Ritual context; NVivo coding

***Corresponding author:**
Xiaotian Guo
(22010040@siswa.unimas.my)

Citation: Guo, X., Sahari, F. (2026). Authenticity in crisis: Structural tensions and challenges in the heritage preservation of Dongyang woodcarving. *Journal of Chinese Architecture and Urbanism*. 8(4):026060013. https://doi.org/10.36922/JCAU026060013

Received: February 8, 2026

Revised: June 2, 2026

Accepted: July 3, 2026

Published online: July 23, 2026

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited

Publisher's Note: AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

Dongyang woodcarving (DYWC) is widely regarded as a prominent form of China's woodcarving heritage (Shi & Song, 2018) and was included in the first national ICH register in 2006. Originating in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), its artistry flowered most fully during the Ming–Qing period (1368–1912) (Dai *et al*., 2023). Recognised as a semiotic system, it conveys the values of Confucian culture and cosmological concepts via motifs such as the Loong (龙, *long*; the Chinese dragon) and bat patterns

(Rawson, 1984; Wang, 1999). Renowned for intricate relief carvings and auspicious imagery, DYWC is both a longstanding artistic tradition and a culturally embedded symbolic system (Zhang, 2020). Its richly carved reliefs and auspicious motifs drawn from Confucianism (Zhang, 2020) position the artefact as both an item of artistic patrimony and a culturally rooted sign system.

The preservation of DYWC has been challenged by rapid urbanisation, the spread of mechanised reproduction and changing market demands (Zheng *et al*., 2025). In most cases, marketability and development of tourism are prioritised by efforts for revitalisation over the preservation of heritage authenticity. Many state and local programmes emphasise branding and visitor numbers, potentially compromising efforts to preserve the authenticity of cultural heritage. The concept of authenticity remains highly debated in heritage studies. Scholars have examined authenticity from experiential, constructivist, and ontological perspectives (Jones, 2010; Wang, 1999). In the context of DYWC, these perspectives showcase the tension between contemporary transformation and cultural preservation. The present study identifies three interrelated threats to DYWC authenticity: (i) symbolic erosion driven by industrial production, (ii) market-induced aesthetic simplification, and (iii) displacement from its architectural and ritual matrix. This study contributes to discussions on intangible heritage by examining technical, symbolic, and spatial changes that might affect the traditional craft practices and their authenticity.

Although intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and authenticity have attracted increasing attention among scholars, pre-existing studies have emphasised tourism commodification, material preservation or policy frameworks. The living-craft paradigm considers both the tangible properties of handicrafts and the experiential dimensions of heritage. This goes beyond ideological perspectives, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of authenticity. In particular, little empirical data has been obtained to study the relationship of these dimensions in conditions of fast socio-economic change.

In recent years, scholars have been paying more attention to the dynamic and negotiated nature of the authenticity of ICH. Recent scholarship increasingly treats authenticity not as a fixed property of objects but as a relational quality negotiated among communities, markets and institutions (Bortolotto, 2020; Harrison, 2019). The researchers suggest that commercialisation, tourism development and digital reproduction shape the craft practices, creating tensions between economic sustainability and cultural integrity (P. Zhu *et al*., 2025). Most of the studies have emphasised the need for integrated strategies that extend beyond materialistic preservation to symbolic meaning, social function, and spatial context (Połeć & Murawska, 2021; Yan *et al*., 2025). These views mean that authenticity should be studied as a multidimensional phenomenon rooted in cultural systems, not simply as a fixed quality of artefacts. Despite these developments, few empirical studies have examined the semiotic, technical, and contextual dimensions of authenticity in living craft traditions such as DYWC. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions:

(i) How is authenticity in DYWC being structurally challenged in contemporary practice?
(ii) What are the key dimensions of symbolic, technical, and contextual disruption?
(iii) How can an integrated framework support sustainable heritage preservation?

2. Conceptual framework and literature review

2.1. The concept of authenticity in heritage studies

Modern heritage studies have recently undergone a significant re-evaluation of the concept of authenticity. Early discussions of authenticity were strongly shaped by objectivist perspectives, which highlight both historical accuracy and material originality. Winter (2013) states that recent scholarship explores authenticity through the perspectives of socio-cultural and constructivist approaches. In critical heritage studies, more recent research has extended this shift by outlining the critical elements of heritage and facilitating a broader theoretical imagination in heritage study (Waterton & Watson, 2013). Therefore, the understandings of authenticity might vary across different cultural contexts, instead of being universally defined (UNESCO, 2003).

More recent developments in heritage studies extend these ideas further by positing that authenticity is also an evolving and negotiated concept. This perspective implies that authenticity is to be considered with respect to cultural and social conditions in contemporary times. Scholars argue that institutional frameworks, global heritage discourses, and market forces play a crucial role in determining the contemporary comprehension of authenticity (Jones, 2009; Tuyen, 2023). Digitisation may weaken the cultural meanings attached to local communities when heritage is detached from its original social context. Furthermore, emerging research highlights how the digital transformation and cultural commodification are changing what is seen as authentic. The emergence of new technologies and digital dissemination of heritage information via online communities allows access on

a wider level but also raises questions of authenticity, materiality and experience (Li, 2022; Lian & Xie, 2024; Pesce & Franzè, 2025). The need for an understanding of authenticity as a multifaceted phenomenon with material, symbolic and experiential manifestations is reinforced by these developments.

Wang's (1999) essential tripartite schema portrays the multifaceted aspects of authenticity in heritage environments. Objectively authentic work shows evidence that materials, form, and technique are accurate; constructively authentic work derives legitimacy from shared cultural meanings and expectations; existential authenticity emerges from the participant's subjective immersion and coherence of experience. In DYWC, all three dimensions can be observed. Belief in traditional resources, time-honoured practices, and iconic designs justifies the authenticity at the material and semiotic levels. Ironically, the alteration of these aspects to appeal to contemporary consumer preferences, such as simplification of the motifs or digital reproduction, is a true example of an adaptation that was created through changes in the market. The presence of the existential characteristic of authenticity in the transmission of cultural values is seen through master-apprentice and family relationships.

In light of Cohen's (1988) argument, the authenticity aspect is not a property of cultural objects but a relational quality where the heritage objects and their viewers can interact. This perspective is aligned with the school of symbolic interactionism, where meanings are constituted as a result of social negotiation. Taken out of the ritual and architectural contexts in which they were originally organised to provide meaning, DYWC motifs experience semantic attenuation and become decorative elements instead of carriers of cosmological and ethical order.

2.2. Authenticity challenges in intangible cultural heritage

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) regards ICH as being threatened with the risks of museumification and folklorisation, in which practising ways of life are either frozen or transformed into commodified spectacles. State rhetoric confuses notions of authenticity, as this rhetoric habitually refers to cultural heritage as a strategic national cultural resource. The Chinese state discourse of heritage tends to rebrand cultural heritage as a national resource in strategic terms, making the concept of authenticity difficult (Su, 2011). The framing mainly focuses on spectacle, tourism value and economic returns at the expense of conservation of meanings held in the local practices and daily life. This framing often puts spectacle and tourism value and economic benefits in the forefront of the conservation of those meanings that are the result of local practice and everyday life.

The conflicts in DYWC are highly evident. The growth of the redwood furniture business and the extensive marketing of mass-produced carvings have particularly reduced the cultural importance of some of the most important visual elements, including the sparrow brace and corbel designs, which once had a lot of symbolic and structural meaning. Skublewska-Paszkowska *et al.* (2022) emphasise that more than three-quarters of the objects made in factories are not hand-carved, which eliminates the hand-tool marks, which are an essential element of the traditional expressive vocabulary of the craft. The proliferation of industrial modes of production is threatening the originality on the grounds of craftsmanship, which is significant towards the identification of DYWC as an ICH. The problem of industrialisation in types of production is threatening the authenticity of production based on craftsmanship, which is paramount in listing DYWC as an ICH.

2.3 Symbolic systems and semiotic authenticity

Dongyang woodcarving is a semiotic system in which the visual motifs represent signs that encode moral values, mythological tales, and status in society. The triadic model of semiotics proposed by Peirce (1931) was used to analyse the cultural meanings conveyed by these carvings. This model conceptualises meaning through the relationship among the sign, object, and interpretant. Here, the sign refers to the symbolic representation or physical form; the object is the entity to which the sign refers; and the interpretant is the culturally informed meaning attributed to the sign.

Yet, when the patterns of DYWC are lost in their natural space or ritual settings, e.g., ancestral halls related to traditional belief systems, the triadic relationship is deformed. Decontextualisation causes semiotic drift or symbolic displacement, when the motifs become decontextualised and become a decorative device, losing their underlying cultural echo. These deliberations have been represented in the NVivo node symbolic decontextualisation, which is one of the overarching concerns in the analysis that has indicated the loss of culturally entrenched meanings in the developing DYWC practice.

2.4. Contemporary debates on heritage commodification and cultural sustainability

The latest international research has also been looking at the conflict between preservation of heritage, commodification, and cultural sustainability within craft traditions. The research on commodification of heritage

holds that market integration tends to turn cultural artefacts into consumer goods, simplifying the symbolic meaning and prioritising the visual over the cultural (Bala, 2026). Although this process is economically advantageous, there are risks of losing the traditional practices of heritage to their original socio-cultural contexts, as well as turning them into aesthetic commodities.

Meanwhile, the idea of cultural sustainability has been growing in prominence, with the necessity of finding a balance between economic feasibility and cultural meaning, communal involvement, and intergenerational transfer (Banda *et al.*, 2024; Duxbury *et al.*, 2020; Soini & Birkeland, 2014). Consequently, ICH should be understood as a living practice that needs to be managed so as not to lose its spiritual integrity.

The recent work in global craft preservation highlights the necessity of linking traditional knowledge systems with digital records. Additionally, participatory heritage and community-based approaches to preservation are also needed (Bala, 2026; Ding *et al.*, 2025). It advocates moving away from object-based conservation towards process-oriented conservation. Under process-oriented conservation, authenticity is retained through practice, meaning and context rather than through recreation of something that was.

Instances that permit semiotic analysis, technical transformation and spatial context to form part of a single analysis are very rare in empirical studies. It is especially evident in discussions of Chinese craft traditions such as DYWC, where authenticity is heavily layered on a system of symbols, architectural reasoning and infused into ritual lifeways. This study attempts to bridge these two streams of scholarship by linking recent developments in the commodification/sustainability discourse to a multidimensional concept of authenticity.

2.5. NVivo-coded themes on authenticity challenges

Through thematic coding of 16 semi-structured interviews and photographic documentation, three major categories emerged, aligning with the structural challenges to authenticity. The key thematic categories derived from NVivo coding are presented in Table 1.

The three areas will be elaborated on in Section 4 (Findings), highlighting how authenticity through its symbolic, aesthetic, and contextual dimensions is being redefined within our contemporary DYWC ecosystem.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the authenticity issue of DYWC, which represents intangible heritage in transition. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it can reveal layers of symbolism, meaning production, cultural norms, and practice-based knowledge that cannot be captured fully through quantitative methods alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case of DYWC was an interesting one as it incorporates traditional craftsmanship, symbolic value, community spirit and a market-driven transformation. The research is based on various data sources that include field photographs of historical woodcarving artefacts, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and direct observations from visits to the carving workshops and heritage buildings. To thematically code the materials, NVivo version 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., Australia) was used for thematic coding to inductively identify and deductively confirm patterns in the authenticity discussion. The overall research design, including data collection, coding, and thematic synthesis, is illustrated in Figure 1.

3.2. Fieldwork and data collection

3.2.1. Applicability of the interview methodology

Participants were recruited through professional networks, heritage institutions and contacts made on-site during fieldwork. To explore the authenticity issues at DYWC, a semi-structured interview was adopted as the main means

Table 1. Three major categories

NVivo code node	Description	Participants referencing themes
Symbolic drift	Loss or mutation of traditional symbolic logic	68.75%
Market-driven simplification	Alteration of design for consumer appeal	62.5%
Contextual displacement	Carvings detached from traditional architecture/rituals	75%

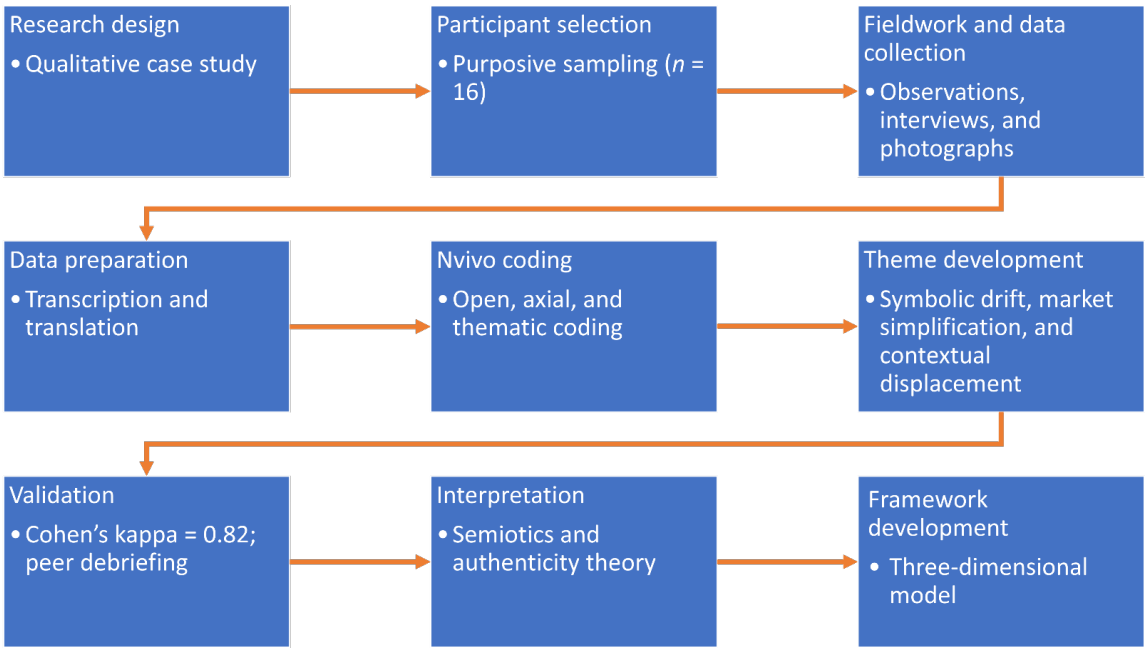


Figure 1. Methodological flowchart of the study. Source: Diagram by the authors

of data collection. Considering that authenticity in ICH is symbolically constructed through craft knowledge and socio-cultural negotiation, interviews are uniquely well-positioned to capture the experiential, technical, and interpretive aspects of intangible heritage that cannot be directly observed.

To capture diverse perspectives, the present study included several stakeholder categories, namely master carvers, cultural officials, scholars, museum curators, traders, and residents. The groups take different stances within the ecosystem of DYWC and thus express different ideas of authenticity, transmission, adaptation to the market, and architecture use. The inclusion of this set of actors allows triangulation on the level of the professional, institutional, and community perspectives.

Interviews produced qualitative data in detail, with descriptions of carving logic, interpreting motifs, workshop activities, market constraints and spatial displacement. These data allow us to gain a better understanding of the process of authenticity construction, negotiation, and contest in practice. The approach consequently facilitates a detailed discussion of symbolic drift, market-oriented simplification, and contextual displacement, which contribute to the analytical fundamental categories of this work (Momeni & Hashemi, 2023).

3.2.2. Interview outline design

To ensure methodological rigour, a detailed interview guide was developed. The structure is necessary to gather comprehensive data that represents a broad spectrum of points of view. The forces that affected the spread of handicraft ICH are complex. The development of the practical protective policies of DYWC art is one of the purposes of the research. In order to do this, there is a series of carefully formulated interview questions designed to explore the inherent meanings of the art, what stands in the way of its continuation, and what the possible ways of protecting it are.

This research has employed an in-depth and systematic approach and has developed an interview guide to investigate the meanings, challenges, and safeguarding measures associated with DYWC from the perspectives of different stakeholders. The design rationale of the framework of the interview can be summarised as follows.

The introduction to the interview guide provides the context and objectives of the research and explains the study purpose and confidentiality procedures to participants. This initiative is intended to develop trust and facilitate open and honest communication by expressing the scholarly nature of the interview and its strict rules on the use of data. Participants felt safe to express their

ideas without any hesitation, as the assurance of their confidentiality and the non-commercial use of their responses made them comfortable with this type of study.

The basic information section contained a series of questions to receive background information concerning interviewees, such as institutional affiliation, professional position and years of experience. This background information was necessary for interpreting participants' responses in relation to their professional expertise and experience. Knowing the backgrounds and the jobs of the respondents allows for analysing and interpreting the opinions of these participants much more correctly.

The main body of the interview guide consists of systematically designed questions intended to obtain comparable data from all respondents. These questions are grouped under the following themes: the symbolic value of DYWC art; the threats and challenges faced by this art form; existing conservation practices and policies; cultural identity; and historical narratives.

The first set of questions explores participants' perceptions of the symbolic significance of DYWC, particularly its role in reinforcing Chinese culture and facilitating a deeper understanding of history. These questions help reveal the broader social and cultural functions of DYWC. The second set of questions examines the risks associated with maintaining and transmitting the authenticity of DYWC, thereby identifying the obstacles perceived by inheritors, practitioners, and scholars. The third set asks interviewees to assess existing policies and propose new policies for improved conservation. Their responses help determine the effectiveness of current policy frameworks and identify areas for further development. Finally, the interview guide includes questions on how interviewees perceive collaboration among different groups in safeguarding DYWC art, with the aim of promoting cross-sector cooperation and clarifying the roles that different stakeholders may play in future conservation work. The full interview guide is provided in the Appendix.

3.2.3. Interviewee selection

The research used a purposive sampling approach to make sure that information-rich participants with first-hand experience of the DYWC ecosystem were included. The respondents were purposively selected according to their experience, level of expertise, and position in terms of relevance to the production, management, interpretation, and consumption of DYWC. This method allowed the research to elicit various but complementary views of authenticity.

In order to arrive at the diversity of stakeholders, six types of participants were included, including master carvers, cultural officials, scholars/experts, museum curators, woodcarving traders and residents/users. The groups have different positions in the heritage system—they can be involved in the process of transferring knowledge, policy adoption, mediating in the market, and using it in their daily lives; thus, enabling triangulation of perspectives of professionals, institutions, and communities.

The final sample size was 16 participants, which is consistent with qualitative research requirements that put a greater emphasis on depth, relevance, and richness in experience rather than statistical representativeness. Sample adequacy was assessed using the principle of data saturation, in which no significant new themes or insights were identified at the later stages of data collection. In addition to the principle of data saturation, the adequacy of the sample was evaluated using the concept of *information power*, which suggests that the more relevant and specific the information held by participants, the fewer participants are required (Malterud *et al.*, 2016). In this study, participants were purposively selected based on their direct and long-term engagement with the DYWC ecosystem, ensuring high information richness. The relatively narrow research aim, combined with strong participant specificity and in-depth interviews, supports the methodological sufficiency of the sample. Therefore, the sample size is considered appropriate for generating analytically meaningful insights within an exploratory qualitative framework, rather than for statistical generalisation.

In addition, the selection criteria focused on participants who have extensive experience (i.e. master carvers with more than 25 years of practice) and direct exposure to activities related to heritage. These criteria helped ensure that the data collected were analytically meaningful and contextually grounded. Together, purposive sampling, stakeholder diversity, and saturation-based justification strengthen the credibility and empirical grounding of the study. The distribution of stakeholder categories included in the study is summarised in Table 2.

Each interview lasted 45–90 min, was conducted in Mandarin, and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Transcripts were later translated into English for analysis.

3.3. NVivo coding process

Analytical transparency and methodological rigour were ensured using a systematic, multi-stage coding process on NVivo 12 Plus, which is a qualitative data analysis software. The process was performed in three consecutive steps: open coding, axial coding, and thematic synthesis.

Table 2. Six categories of stakeholders

Group	Sample count	Example profiles
Master carvers	4	Inheritors with >25 years of experience
Cultural officials	3	Local heritage bureau and ICH centre staff
Scholars/experts	3	Professors in art history and heritage studies
Museum curators	2	Managers of local DYWC exhibitions
Woodcarving traders	2	Art dealers and furniture manufacturers
Residents/users	2	Owners of DYWC-decorated homes

Abbreviations: DYWC: Dongyang woodcarving; ICH: Intangible cultural heritage.

During the initial step, inductive open coding was performed, whereby the codes were developed directly from the raw interview transcripts and field notes without predetermined categories. Parts of the text that reflected the experience and interpretations of the participants, including machine-made carvings, absence of hand-tool marks, motifs that look traditional but lack meaning, and carvings removed from ancestral halls, were identified and marked as first codes. The axial coding technique was adopted in stage two to sort and group the first codes by identifying patterns, similarities and conceptual connections. Codes pertaining to the categories of loss of carving logic, change of preference, and ritual detachment were grouped into higher-order categories. This stage generated a broad source of descriptive nodes that were grounded in empirical evidence. This action facilitated the aggregation of the discrete observations into analytically significant groups.

Thematic synthesis was done in the last phase to combine these categories into three broad analytical themes: symbolic drift, market-driven simplification, and contextual displacement. These themes were not preconceived, but they were developed through iterative comparison of data segments, codes and theoretical constructs.

NVivo nodes were therefore developed through a bottom-up process, in which raw qualitative data were used to build the coding structure that was then optimised by reiterating the analysis. This methodology allowed keeping the findings empirically based yet theoretically informed.

To assess coding reliability, an intercoder agreement test was done on about 20 percent of the data (three randomly chosen interview transcripts). The same data were coded by an expert in heritage studies, and the results were compared through the Cohen's kappa coefficient, which showed a value of 0.82, indicating that there is a high level of agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the coding framework was refined accordingly.

In addition, two external scholars were involved in peer debriefing sessions, which further confirmed the thematic structure and increased the credibility and consistency of the analytical process. The axial coding structure and thematic relationships are outlined in Table 3.

A sample node graph derived from the NVivo analysis is provided in Figure 2.

Table 3. Three overall axial themes

Axial theme	Child nodes (Examples)
Symbolic drift	Motif simplification, loss of semantic layering
Market-driven simplification	Youth preference, trend influence, and client taste changes
Contextual displacement	Loss of ritual setting, shift from sacred to décor

3.4. Research validity and reflexivity

To increase the validity of the study, triangulation was utilised through the verification of data from multiple sources, including photographic evidence, interviews, and field observations. An electronic research journal was maintained to document interpretative decisions made during the process of analysis. To reduce researcher bias, reflexive notes were also written as soon as each interview was conducted, to note personal assumptions, especially those connected with the interpretation of a symbolic loss or transformation. Additionally, two external scholars in the area of Chinese architectural heritage were invited to a peer debriefing session, which offered critical feedback and confirmation of the developing thematic structures.

3.5. Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, and the ethics committee of the affiliated institution approved the study. Particular attention was paid to sensitive cultural data, especially data on the ritual use of DYWC; these data were anonymised in various ways that guaranteed confidentiality and cultural safety. These procedures strengthened the credibility of the findings by grounding the analysis in multiple sources of empirical

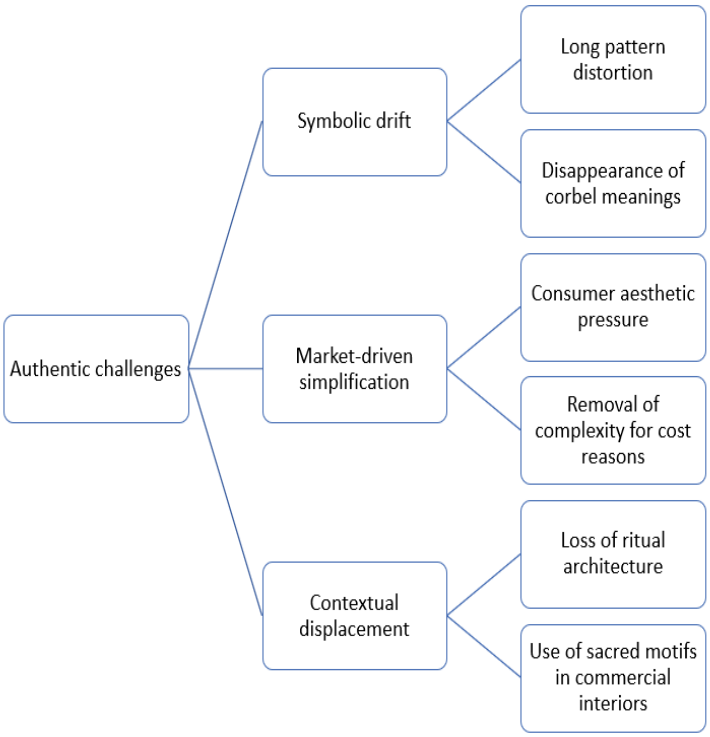


Figure 2. NVivo node graph of authenticity challenges in Donyang woodcarving. Source: Diagram by the authors

data and a systematic analytical process. The triangulation/multi-source method by which the study is conducted provides a detailed and contextually deep insight into how the concept of authenticity is perceived, challenged, and modified in the modern setting of the DYWC.

4. Findings

This section presents the key themes identified through NVivo analysis of interviews and field documentation. Three core challenges to authenticity were identified: symbolic drift, market-driven simplification, and contextual displacement. Together, these themes represent a structural reconfiguration of DYWC's semiotic, aesthetic, and ritual dimensions.

4.1. Symbolic drift: Semantic disruption of traditional motifs

Interviews and field data indicate that the symbolic drift is a common characteristic of DYWC: that is, it involves the depletion or distortion of the meaning in traditional motifs. NVivo coding reveals that 68.75 percent of the interviewees mentioned themes related to symbolic drift, with many interviewees mentioning the Loong-motif distortion and loss of carving logic. Out of 120 Loong motifs that were recorded in fieldwork, only 26.4 percent followed the old compositional rule of "Three Stops and Nine Similarities." This compositional principle serves as a fundamental design rule in traditional Chinese woodcarving. This principle governs the allotment, proportional distribution, natural accentuation, formal emphasis, and symbolicemotional cohesionrence associated with allotment, proportional distribution, natural accentuation, formal emphasis, and symbolic emotional cohesion associated with Loong motifs in classical Chinese woodcarving (Sullivan & Vainker, 2018). The three stops signify structural shifts in the body of the dragon, i.e., at the head, torso, and tail, anchoring visual flow but also segmentation balance. The "Nine Similarities" refer to stylised features drawn from different animals (such as the horns of a deer, scales of fish, and claws of an eagle) that together create a culturally accepted symbolic image of the Loong as an amalgamated magical creature. This rule is aesthetically fundamental, not only in a decorative sense; it enshrines a logic of symbols and forms that together

illustrate the structural order of the cosmos, hierarchy, and harmony. Therefore, deviation from this compositional canon does not simply mark technical simplification, but rather the disturbance of the transfer of culturally enshrined design knowledge. Visually, the comparison between historical and contemporary Loong carvings highlights the minimisation of style and composition, as shown in Figure 3. In an interview, one of the participants remarked: "The carvings of today do not have any *qiyun* (气韵; spiritual rhythm). Machines only copy shapes" (Interviewee 01). Similarly, another master carver reflected: "In the past, every line had a reason. Today, many patterns are copied without understanding why they exist" (Interviewee 05).

This phenomenon can be explained theoretically because Wang (1999) separates objective authenticity and constructive authenticity, while the loss of traditional carving logic indicates a loss of both material accuracy and cultural meaning. In addition, the symbolic drift within the semiotic triad (Peirce, 1931) involves a rupturing of the symbol-object-interpretant connection (motif-cultural reference-community). As the motifs lose their cultural codes, they are transformed into visually identifiable markers with no performative power and exist in a semantically dilute state. Not only stylistically but semiotically, DYWC has undergone this structural change.

4.2. Market-driven simplification: Aesthetic compromise under consumer pressure

Field observations and interview data indicate a trend toward market-driven aesthetic simplification in DYWC. The theme itself occurred in 62.5 percent of the interview transcripts, and the most frequently mentioned sub-categories included youth preference, cost-driven reduction, and pattern vulgarisation. According to artisans and owners of workshops, intricate, symbol-laden designs such as the Hundred Gates Piercing the Heart (百门穿心; *baimen chuanxin*) and the Nine Loongs Playing with a Pearl (九龙戏珠; *jiulong xi zhu*) are becoming increasingly rarer because they are labour-intensive. Simplified geometrical motifs or idealised traditional motives have become more prevalent. One workshop owner noted: "Young clientele does not know what it means; they simply desire something that will appear traditional" (Interviewee 08). Similarly, a trader further explained: "Customers rarely ask about meaning anymore; they ask about price and appearance" (Interviewee 07). A mid-level artisan gave an economic explanation for this shift: "It is not worthwhile to spend a month chiseling one corbel if the market price is only 200 yuan. Then, we machine-manufacture the base and make light touches manually, so to speak" (Interviewee 10).

A visual comparison between a fully hand-carved piece and a computer numerical control (CNC)-machined piece shows that the mass-produced items lose the distinctive hand-tool marks of hand carving, as shown in Figure 4.

This shift is also indicative of the wider commodification of heritage processes, in which cultural production is re-packaged to meet market demands to become efficient and consumer-friendly. Such changes can be interpreted as the re-coding of heritage into market-



Figure 3. Comparison of Loong motifs. Left: traditional Loong carving in an ancestral hall; right: modern decorative Loong panel on redwood furniture. Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

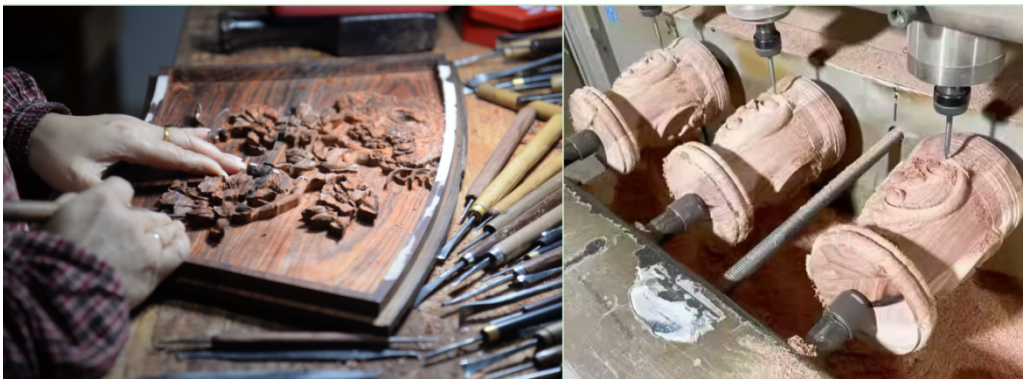


Figure 4. Comparison of hand carving and computer numerical control (CNC) wood carving. Left: hand-carved woodwork showing visible hand-tool marks; right: CNC woodcarving process, which produces more uniform surfaces and lacks the irregular marks characteristic of hand carving. Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

friendly forms, sometimes at the cost of symbolic richness and craftsmanship, as Q. Zhu and Rahman (2025) put it. Within the authenticity theory, this transformation can be seen as a movement away from existential authenticity of embodied craftsmanship and experience and meaning towards a more superficial and consumption-based authenticity. In turn, the simplification of motifs and the growing dependence on mechanised processes not only transform aesthetic forms but also damage the cultural and experiential aspect, which has long been a feature of DYWC practice.

4.3. Contextual displacement: Detachment from ritual and architectural settings

The field visit and interviews provide some serious evidence that DYWC carvings are being severed more and more rapidly out of their original architectural and ritual contexts. This is the theme that was most prevalent in the NVivo analysis, as it was mentioned in 75 percent of the interviews and field notes.

Corbel motifs that once portrayed moral stories, such as *zhongyi baoguo* (忠义报国; loyalty and patriotism), have since been widely redone as decorative mirror frames, headboards or wall panels in commercial or residential décor. In some buildings in recent times, traditional carvings are used without considering the context of historical architecture. For instance, a Bright Summit (光明顶, *guangming ding*; bright top beam), originally designed for a definite structural function, might be installed in a place where its original purpose and meaning are lost (e.g., beneath the staircase). A senior municipal cultural official remarked on this phenomenon: "Some restaurants use ancestral motifs as vintage-style decorations. That's disrespectful. It is just like a gravestone in the kitchen" (Interviewee 11). An example of this was provided by a furniture dealer dealing in reclaimed DYWC items: "We had a screen made from carved beams from a dismantled Qing-era house. It even appears antique, but no one knows that it was once a hall altar" (Interviewee 06). Similarly, a resident observed: "These carvings used to belong to specific places and rituals. Now they are everywhere, but they don't feel the same" (Interviewee 12).

This displacement is emphasised in the juxtaposition between the conventional location of a corbel in an ancestral hall and the use of the corbel in modern interiors as décor, as shown in Figure 5.

These results indicate that there is a multi-layered authenticity crisis in the semiotic system, aesthetic integrity and ritual grounding of DYWC. The following section will provide a discussion on potentially helpful initiatives to alleviate these threats and re-establish DYWC in culturally significant practices. The carvings were placed in a rigid axial hierarchy in Ming–Qing ancestral halls. The authority of lineage was expressed in motifs on central beams, and the status of transitioning between structural layers was conveyed through secondary carvings on sparrow braces. The density of the relief was equal to the centrality during the rites: the more profound the relief and the more complicated the iconography, the nearer the location was to the ancestral altar.

Compared to the classical style used in commercial interiors, however, today, carvings are often separated out of structural reasoning and reorganised in decorative symmetry instead of ritual stratification. As an illustration, Bright Summit beam components have been installed



Figure 5. Comparison of corbel use in a Qing-era ancestral hall and modern interior décor repurposing the same motif. Source: Photos by the authors (2025)

under staircases or even as a free-standing screen, and this has broken their connection between roof load support and the orientation of the ancestral axis. Such relocation converts structural-semiotic agents into ornamental surfaces, thus disrupting their architectural grammar.

The results on contextual displacement also emphasise the significance of spatial and ritual embeddedness in perpetuating authenticity. Authenticity is a result of the interplay between cultural objects, social practices and the contextual environments as postulated by relational theories of heritage (Nakonieczna & Szczepański, 2023). This relational framework is broken when DYWC elements are taken out of the ancestral halls and into a commercial or decorative environment, breaking the connection between form, function, and meaning. This is a failure in the context of interpretation needed to decode cultural signs, in semiotic terms. There is, therefore, not only a material or symbolic loss of authenticity but also a spatial loss which dislocates culturally embedded artefacts into decontextualised ornamental items.

5. Discussion and strategic recommendations

In light of the exploratory characteristics of this qualitative study, as well as the small and purposively selected sample, the ensuing discussion and recommendations should be seen as analytically grounded propositions, rather than universal generalisations. The goal is not to provide definitive policy recommendations but rather to supply theoretically informed and empirically grounded insights on the structural dynamics at play in DYWC authenticity.

This analysis shows that DYWC suffers from a multi-layered structural crisis that takes the form of symbolic drift, market simplification, and contextual displacement. Phenomena such as these can be understood semiotically as a rupture in the triadic relation of the signifier (motif), the signified (cultural meaning) and the interpretant (community meaning) as developed by Peirce (1931). The erosion of aesthetic value caused by losing symbolic coherence also disrupts the cultural grammar that previously connected craft, meaning and social practice.

This section situates the empirical findings within broader theoretical debates and further develops a strategic model of the protection of DYWC authenticity. The findings indicate that the loss of authenticity may not be attributed to a single cause but is rather caused by overlapping structural tensions that cut across the technical, symbolic and contextual levels. These dimensions are analytically distinct elements, but in practice, they are profoundly connected and reinforcing. As mentioned in Section 4, authenticity is undermined on multiple fronts. The motif and the meaning are becoming increasingly separated semiotically, and this separation corrodes the interpretant (Peirce, 1931). Such disruption weakens material integrity as well as breaks the cultural grammar which has traditionally connected craft, meaning and social life. Similarly, the simplification of the market represents the market re-programming of the heritage, in which the culturally specific symbolic richness of forms is lost to market interpretability and streamlined consumption. In addition, such contextual displacement of carvings removes them from the ritual and architectural systems that gave them their initial cultural intelligibility, which threatens to reduce them to aesthetically attractive but semantically empty signifiers.

A sustainable preservation plan, therefore, should integrate craft practice, semiotic integrity, and architectural context in DYWC preservation. It is not enough to preserve the material form but to integrate the model, which would take care of the processes of knowledge transmission, cultural intelligibility and the spatial logic.

In this respect, a three-dimensional model of authenticity protection is proposed below, which will address the main threats revealed during the above analysis, and will inform further interventions on policy, practice, and pedagogical levels.

5.1. Technical integrity: Reviving the craft through digital–analogue synergy

Any preservation of the technical authenticity of DYWC is not merely a matter of avoiding mechanisation; it also entails the maintenance of the tactile and structural intelligence inherent in the art of traditional carving. Carvings also appeared on load-bearing corbels, beam ends, sparrow braces (雀替, *que ti*), and partitioning screens in the ancestral halls and Qing residential compounds. Incision depth, relief layering, and tool direction shaped the scale, texture, and visual effect of the work.

It should be emphasised that three-dimensional scanning should not be treated merely as archival documentation but also as a tool for reconstruction and analysis. High-resolution scans can capture incision gradients, relief stratifications, and tool-path vectors, enabling researchers to study how knife marks respond to timber grain orientation as well as structural stress points. Microtopographical surface mapping differentiates between hand-cut compression ridges and uniformity produced by CNC milling, yielding an objective basis for texture authentication.

These digital datasets can also be incorporated into apprenticeship pedagogy to supplement artisans instead of replacing them, thereby enabling apprentices to visualise the sectional depth, curvature logic and motif–structure fit. In this regard, digital technology acts as an analytical enhancement rather than an aesthetic replacement in that the embodied architectural logic of DYWC is maintained in contemporary production systems.

This approach can be applied in practice by means of cooperation between heritage institutions, local governments, and technical research centres. By way of example, three-dimensional scanning and digital archiving programs may be put in place at regional heritage conservation agencies to record high-value carvings, and micro-topographical features, such as tool marks and relief depth, can be recorded. These datasets might be incorporated into the vocational learning institutions and craft schools, whereby the apprentices are able to learn the logic of carving, using digital simulation as well as manual practice. Additionally, certification can be implemented to help differentiate between fully hand-carved, hybrid and machine-assisted pieces to further promote technical authenticity in the marketplace.

5.2. Semiotic reinforcement: Re-encoding cultural meanings in public education

To reduce symbolic drift, it is necessary to re-encode and re-situate the symbols of DYWC, which is done by providing special community education courses. In the past, motifs such as the Loong, phoenix and corbel brackets have represented complex cultural, spiritual and moral symbolism. The expressiveness and cultural meaning of such symbols are jeopardised by their increasing loss of connection to their original setting. The semantic depth can only be restored with the help of preservation, along with active cultural outreach.

A multifaceted approach is proposed. The establishment of a detailed motif meaning archive would make it possible to systematically label visual motifs, thus linking them to their historical, linguistic and narrative equivalents. Bilingual educational materials in Mandarin and English should therefore be distributed in schools, tourist sites, and online forums in order to enlarge access and enhance cross-cultural knowledge. The third recommendation involves establishing workshops to decode symbols. Artisans, designers and youth from the community will be involved in the symbolic lexicon and their relevance to contemporary DYWC practice. The final recommendation advocates for the establishment of community-based programs that allow for the decoding of symbols by community-run organisations. These classes should essentially focus on the system of DYWC motifs and their contemporary cultural relevance.

The objective of the strategies is to revive the cultural literacy of the producers and viewers. Consequently, carvings can be seen not just as decoration but as a living record of a common heritage and narrative history. It is proposed that these resources be incorporated into an open-access atlas of Dongyang symbols. It will comprise augmented reality (AR) features allowing users to scan and read motifs in situ. This will result in increased engagement with the symbolic nature of the craft on the part of the population. The participation of the public can be increased by bringing together these materials into an open-source atlas of Dongyang symbols that is AR-enabled to identify and interpret in-situ motifs to enhance the richness of symbolic interaction.

Symbolic reinforcement can be operationalised at the implementation level using curriculum integration and interpretation of public heritage initiatives. An example of this is introducing educational segments on the DYWC symbolism in school curricula, especially in art classes, history classes, and cultural studies classes. The museums and heritage institutions are able to create interactive exhibits and online apps, such as QR-code or AR-based

solutions, which enable visitors to scan the carvings and get the symbolic meaning. Moreover, master artisans can also conduct community workshops to help in the passing of intergenerational knowledge so that the symbolic literacy is not only preserved but also reproduced in contemporary society.

5.3. Contextual anchoring: Reconnecting Dongyang woodcarving with community rituals

Authenticity in ICH cannot be fully safeguarded unless the practice is re-anchored within its original spatial and ritual contexts. DYWC, as a living tradition, derives its meaning not merely from preservation but from continued use within the social and architectural environments for which it was originally intended. As such, revitalising its embeddedness in community life is essential to ensuring its long-term cultural intelligibility.

To this end, we propose several integrated approaches. First, ancestral-hall rituals, including seasonal offerings (岁时节令; suishi jieling), clan ceremonies (入宗; *ruzong*), and memorial rites (祭祀; *jisi*) should be renewed by incorporating DYWC elements into both their spatial structure and symbolic meaning. Second, community-led architectural restoration projects should be supported, with guidance from heritage conservation specialists to ensure that DYWC carvings are reintegrated into meaningful spatial contexts rather than merely appended as decorative features. Third, community craft spaces should be developed to enable DYWC to be practised and transmitted *in situ*, rather than being confined to static museum displays.

These practices reverse the emphasis on the spectacle of heritage to its practical use so that authenticity can be realised in embodied practice instead of being an abstract matter of heritage preservation. More importantly, they rebuild the ritual and architectural grammars in which DYWC previously operated, which will enable both the artisans and the community members to engage in the context of its symbolic system.

Dongyang woodcarving should be integrated into local school events, temple festivals, and civic architecture projects, and thus the craft can become embedded in everyday cultural and spatial experience.

To contextualise the concept of reintegration, policy interventions are to focus on community-based heritage restorations and adaptive reuse projects. The restoration of ancestral halls and traditional homes where DYWC elements may be reinstated with reference to their original architectural reasoning may be aided by local governments and cultural heritage bureaus. Also, it is possible to create guidelines that will control the proper usage of traditional motifs in business areas to avoid cases of culturally inappropriate locations. Local governments and heritage bureaus can initiate pilot projects as living heritage sites and community craft hubs where DYWC is practised, exhibited and applied in its spatial and ritual contexts. These endeavours, then, would enable the authenticity maintenance to take on a new form as living cultural practice rather than passive conservation.

5.4. Integrated framework: The three dimensions of authenticity protection

The following table summarises the proposed strategy (see Table 4). The integrated relationships among technical integrity, semiotic reinforcement, and contextual anchoring within the proposed safeguarding framework are visually illustrated in Figure 6.

Table 4. Recommended strategies

Dimension	Threat addressed	Strategic response
Technical	Loss of craftsmanship texture	Digital–analogue skill preservation
Symbolic	Semantic erosion	Public education and motif decoding
Contextual	Ritual/spatial disconnection	Community reintegration and functional revival

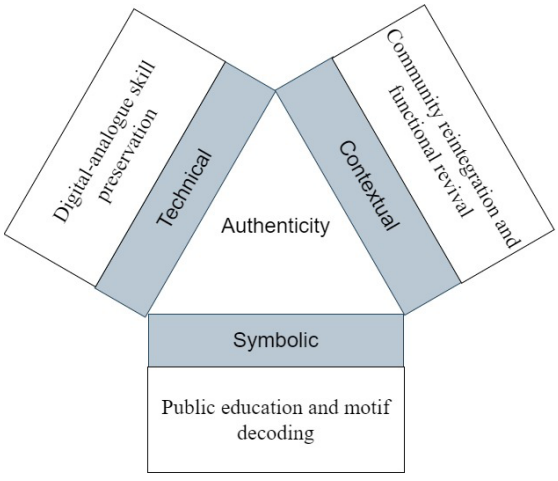


Figure 6. Three-dimensional authenticity protection model. Source: Diagram by the authors

5.5. Reflections and limitations

Despite the extensive qualitative investigation into the hurdles of authenticity arising within DYWC, this study does have some limitations that should be noted.

To begin, a sample of 16 participants is appropriate for this qualitative study. Although this approach is suitable for qualitative, interpretive research and guarantees depth and information richness, it may constrain the generalizability of the findings beyond the particular case context. The views expressed demonstrate the perspective of key stakeholders within the DYWC ecosystem but may not showcase the full diversity of views from other areas or other craft traditions.

The second limitation refers to the geographic and cultural delimitations. Dongyang is the focus of the research. Dongyang is specifically chosen based on its geographic, historical, and social conditions. Accordingly, the results must be understood in context and not generalised to ICH or woodcarving more broadly. It would be interesting to study whether the framework is transferable to other regions or craft systems.

Third, the study is primarily based on the qualitative data obtained through interviews, field notes and images. Qualitative analysis, being interpretative, is susceptible to researcher bias, notwithstanding the use of methodological triangulation to enhance validity. Despite the use of reflexive practices and peer debriefing to lessen this effect, neutrality cannot be assumed.

Moreover, even though there is an indication of the existence of a three-dimensional framework for authenticity protection, the study proposes one as a more conceptual and exploratory model. It has not yet been tested with longitudinal or intervention research. Future research should assess the application and impact of this framework in heritage management practice.

Finally, this does not rely on quantitative validation or survey-based large data to complement the qualitative insights and generalisation. Research has to be complemented with other methods that strengthen the empirical robustness.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the analysis generates interesting insights into the structural dynamics of authenticity in DYWC and provides a springboard for future interdisciplinary and comparative research.

6. Conclusion

This article proposes that the contemporary challenges that DYWC is experiencing regarding authenticity are rife with manifold interconnected pressures of symbolic drift, market-driven simplification and contextual displacement. The qualitative thematic analysis suggests that they develop structural tensions rather than a definitive or generalizable pattern. The findings must therefore be construed as being useful in a particular context, and not to be interpreted in broader theoretical discussions on authenticity and ICH. The framework can also be applied and transferred comparatively to other kinds of heritage experiencing the battle between tradition and modernisation. The present study's theoretical frameworks and pragmatic directions may in future be empirically tested and enriched by adopting interdisciplinary approaches to such research (in digital humanities, participatory design, and policy evaluation).

Acknowledgments

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Xiaotian Guo
Formal analysis: All authors
Investigation: Xiaotian Guo
Methodology: Xiaotian Guo
Writing–original draft: Xiaotian Guo
Writing–review & editing: All authors

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical review and approval for this research were granted by the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Zhejiang Guangsha Vocational and Technical University of Construction (Approval ID: ZJGSU-2025-03741; issuance date: March 25, 2025). All participants provided explicit written consent to participate the current study

Consent for publication

All participants provided explicit written consent to publish anonymized case study findings in peer-reviewed academic journals. No identifiable individual portraits, raw private interview records, or traceable personal information are presented within this manuscript, and all case descriptions have been sufficiently de-identified to prevent the identification of any participant.

Availability of data

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

Bala, R. (2026). Digital Preservation of Traditional Knowledge: Safeguarding Indigenous Heritage through Modern Tools. *International Journal of Applied and Behavioral Sciences*, *03*(01), 87–93.

https://doi.org/10.70388/ijabs250165

Banda, L. O. L., Banda, C. V., Banda, J. T., & Singini, T. (2024). Preserving Cultural Heritage: A Community-Centric Approach to Safeguarding the Khulubvi Traditional Temple Malawi. *Heliyon*, *10*(18), e37610–e37610.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e37610

Bortolotto, C. (2020). Commercialization without over-commercialization: Normative Conundrums across Heritage Rationalities. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *27*(9), 857–868.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1858441

Cohen, E. (1988). Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *15*(3), 371–386.

https://doi.org/10.1016/0160-7383(88)90028-x

Creswell, J., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: SAGE Publications.

Dai, N., Muthuveeran, A. A. S., Noor Azizi, M. A., Ma, L., Ma, Y., & Gao, Y. (2023). Research on the Protection of Architectural Woodcarvings in China from Building Homogeneity: A Synoptic Review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *13*(9), 247–261.

https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i9/18353

Ding, C., Ismail, N. A., Hussein, M. K., & Hussain, N. (2025). A Systematic Review of the Traditional Handicrafts Preservation Toward Sustainable Intangible Cultural Heritage. *SAGE Open*, *15*(3), 1–12.

https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251337837

Duxbury, N., Bakas, F. E., Vinagre de Castro, T., & Silva, S. (2020). Creative Tourism Development Models towards Sustainable and Regenerative Tourism. *Sustainability*, *13*(1), 2.

https://doi.org/10.3390/su13010002

Harrison, S. (2019). *The Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in England: A Comparative Exploration* [PhD Thesis]. Accessed June 12, 2026. https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/36760/1/Suzy%20Harrison%20-%202019.pdf

Jones, S. (2009). Experiencing Authenticity at Heritage Sites: Some Implications for Heritage Management and Conservation. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, *11*(2), 133–147.

https://doi.org/10.1179/175355210x12670102063661

Jones, S. (2010). Negotiating Authentic Objects and Authentic Selves. *Journal of Material Culture*, *15*(2), 181–203.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183510364074

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (2004). Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production. *Museum International*, *56*(1-2), 52–65.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-0775.2004.00458.x

Li, J. (2022). Grounded theory-based model of the influence of digital communication on handicraft intangible cultural heritage. *Heritage Science*, *10*(1), 1–12.

https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-022-00760-z

Lian, Y., & Xie, J. (2024). The Evolution of Digital Cultural Heritage Research: Identifying Key Trends, Hotspots, and Challenges through Bibliometric Analysis. *Sustainability*, *16*(16), 7125.

https://doi.org/10.3390/su16167125

Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample Size in Qualitative Interview studies: Guided by Information Power. *Qualitative Health Research*, *26*(13), 1753–1760.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444

Momeni, M., & Hashemi, S. S. (2023). Identifying factors affecting the development of intangible cultural heritage by using thematic analysis method. *International Journal of Tourism, Culture & Spirituality, 6*(2), 179–199.

https://doi.org/10.22133/ijtcs.2024.444908.1160

Nakonieczna, E., & Szczepański, J. (2023). Authenticity of cultural heritage vis-à-vis heritage reproducibility and intangibility: from conservation philosophy to practice. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *30*(2), 220–237.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2023.2177642

Peirce, C. S. (1931). *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (vols. 1–6). Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press.

Pesce, D., & Franzè, C. (2025). When digital platforms meet tradition: Phygital innovation in the cultural heritage. *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management*, *77*, 101896.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jengtecman.2025.101896

Połeć, W., & Murawska, D. (2021). The Social Constraints on the Preservation and Sustainable Development of Traditional Crafts in a Developed Society. *Sustainability*, *14*(1), 120.

https://doi.org/10.3390/su14010120

Rawson, J. (1984). *Chinese Ornament: The lotus and the dragon*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers.

Shi, W., & Song, J. (2018, December). *Research on the modern inheritance of Chinese Dongyang woodcarving decoration art.* In: *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Art Studies: Science, Experience, Education (ICASSEE 2018)* (pp.

463–466). Paris, France: Atlantis Press.

Skublewska-Paszkowska, M., Milosz, M., Powroznik, P., & Lukasik, E. (2022). 3D technologies for intangible cultural heritage preservation—literature review for selected databases. *Heritage Science*, *10*(1), 1–14.

https://doi.org/10.1186/s40494-021-00633-x

Soini, K., & Birkeland, I. (2014). Exploring the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability. *Geoforum*, *51*, 213–223.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.12.001

Su, X. (2011). Heritage Production and Urban Locational Policy in Lijiang, China. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *35*(6), 1118–1132.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2010.01011.x

Sullivan, M., & Vainker, S. J. (2018). *The arts of China*. University Of California Press.

Tuyen, Q. D. (2023). Staging Culture, Selling Authenticity: The Commodification of the Cham Community's Traditions. In: *Heritage Conservation and Tourism Development at Cham Sacred Sites in Vietnam. Global Vietnam: Across Time, Space and Community*. Singapore: Springer.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-3350-1_8

UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO. Accessed June 12, 2026. https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention

Wang, N. (1999). Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research*, *26*(2), 349–370.

https://doi.org/10.1016/s0160-7383(98)00103-0

Waterton, E., & Watson, S. (2013). Framing theory: towards a critical imagination in heritage studies. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *19*(6), 546–561.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2013.779295

Winter, T. (2013). Clarifying the critical in critical heritage studies. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *19*(6), 532–545.

https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.720997

Yan, G., Yip, J., Keith, K. H. T., & Ni, J. (2025). Changes of identity and value perception in heritage crafts: a means-end chain study of Wangjiang Tiaohua. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *11*(1), 1–13.

https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2520438

Zhang, W. (2020). *Decorative patterns of woodcarving in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang regions in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.* Ocean University of China Press. [In Chinese]

Zheng, Y., Wang, Z., Ren, P., Xu, J., & Tao, J. (2025). Impacts of Urbanization on the Protection of Built Heritage in Traditional Villages: A Case Study of 96 Traditional Villages in Guangzhou, China. *Research Square preprint*.

https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-5845462/v1

Zhu, P., Chi, X., Ryu, H. B., & Han, H. (2025). Experience economy and authenticity in the heritage tourism sector: A multiple-dimensional approach. *Acta Psychologica*, *257*, 105118.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2025.105118

Zhu, Q., & Rahman, R. (2025). Designing ethical souvenirs to sustain the cultural integrity of Dunhuang heritage. *PLoS ONE*, *20*(12), e0338506.

https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0338506

Appendix

A. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Section 1: Participant Background

1. Can you briefly describe your role or involvement with Dongyang Woodcarving (DYWC)?
2. How many years of experience do you have in this field?
3. What type of work do you primarily engage in (e.g., crafting, research, trade, policy)?

Section 2: Understanding of Authenticity

4. How do you define "authentic" Dongyang Woodcarving?
5. What elements do you consider essential for maintaining authenticity (e.g., materials, techniques, symbolism)?
6. Do you think authenticity has changed over time? If yes, how?

Section 3: Symbolic Meaning and Cultural Value

7. What cultural or symbolic meanings are embedded in DYWC motifs?
8. Do you think these meanings are still understood by younger generations or consumers?
9. Have you observed any loss or transformation of symbolic meaning in recent years?

Section 4: Challenges and Threats

10. What are the main challenges facing the preservation of DYWC today?
11. How has market demand influenced design, production, or authenticity?
12. What impact has mechanisation (e.g., CNC carving) had on traditional craftsmanship?
13. Do you think the relocation of carvings from traditional buildings affects their meaning?

Section 5: Preservation and Safeguarding

14. What measures are currently in place to preserve DYWC?
15. What improvements or new strategies would you suggest?
16. What role should government, communities, and artisans play in safeguarding this heritage?

Section 6: Future Perspectives

17. How do you see the future of DYWC?
18. Can traditional practices coexist with modern technologies? If yes, how?

B: Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide used in this study included the following thematic areas:

1. Background Information
    - Role and experience in DYWC
    - Institutional or professional affiliation
2. Symbolic Meaning
    - How do you interpret the symbolic meaning of DYWC motifs?
    - What cultural values do these carvings represent?
3. Challenges to Authenticity
    - What changes have you observed in DYWC practices?
    - What factors threaten authenticity?
4. Conservation and Policy
    - How effective are current preservation efforts?
    - What improvements would you suggest?

5. Future Perspectives
    - How can DYWC be sustained in modern contexts?
    - What roles should different stakeholders play?