

# LOCAL CULTURAL GOVERNANCE AND FOLKLORIC AESTHETICS: AN ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY OF WANG MANTIAN FISH LANTERNS IN HUIZHOU FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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**Abstract:** This study examines the Wang Mantian fish lanterns in Huizhou, China, through the lens of local cultural governance and folkloric aesthetics. Recognized as a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage, the fish lanterns embody centuries-old visual forms, symbolic motifs, and communal rituals that have sustained local identity and spiritual beliefs. Using Panofsky's three-tier iconographic method—pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation—combined with qualitative fieldwork including observation, interviews, and document analysis, the research reveals how the lanterns' aesthetic continuity is underpinned by local governance structures such as fishing associations and village committees. The findings highlight a governance pathway in which cultural heritage management forms the foundation, experiential tourism operates as a strategic vehicle, and sustainable rural development emerges as the outcome. The study demonstrates how community participation, symbolic integrity, and adaptive governance have enabled the Wang Mantian fish lanterns to resist cultural homogenization while contributing to economic revitalization. It offers theoretical and practical insights for policymakers, cultural administrators, and scholars seeking to integrate intangible heritage into local self-government frameworks. Ultimately, the research affirms the potential of folkloric traditions to function as living governance resources that support identity formation, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Folkloric aesthetics, Iconographic analysis, Local cultural governance, Intangible cultural heritage, Sustainable rural development

## 1. Introduction

The Wang Mantian fish lanterns, designated as a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage of Anhui Province, represent one of the most well-preserved folk traditions in the historic Huizhou region (Wang & Wang, 2023). Rooted in agrarian life, the practice originated as a community response to the challenges of fire prevention and collective security. Each year, in the first lunar month, villagers voluntarily organized fishing associations and crafted lanterns in the shape of fish, culminating in a four-day lantern festival from the 13th to the 16th day. These rituals combined prayers for abundant harvests and favorable weather with vibrant processions through ancient Huizhou villages, embodying a living expression of local cultural identity (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Wang Mantian Fish lantern ceremony, 2025.

However, the trajectory of this folk practice has been shaped by broader socio-political transformations. During the turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, folk traditions lost much of their institutional support and internal vitality. Since the 1980s, state intervention has sought to protect, regulate, and commercialize such cultural practices, embedding them within policy frameworks of heritage management and tourism development. Notably, the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (2022) emphasized the strategy of “cultivating tourism through culture and promoting culture through tourism,” accelerating the integration of intangible heritage into the cultural economy (Lei & Chen, 2022). In this context, the Wang Mantian fish lanterns have been reframed simultaneously as a symbolic emblem of faith, a community identity marker, and a cultural tourism commodity.

This dual transformation—wherein artistic forms remain aesthetically stable while their governance and socio-economic functions evolve—raises key questions about the persistence, symbolism, and governance value of such traditions. How have the aesthetic forms and symbolic concepts of the Wang Mantian fish lanterns remained resilient across time? What cultural and societal contexts underlie this stability? And how can local governance frameworks mediate between cultural preservation and contemporary development imperatives?

To address these questions, this study applies iconographic analysis within a governance framework. At three interrelated levels—formal aesthetics, symbolic interpretation, and cultural connotation—the study elucidates the folkloric aesthetics of the Wang Mantian fish lanterns. By linking these aesthetic dimensions to local cultural governance and sustainable development, the research seeks to demonstrate how intangible heritage can serve not only as a symbolic resource but also as a practical instrument for rural revitalization, cultural sustainability, and community identity formation.

## 2. Research Objective

This study aims to analyze the folkloric aesthetics of the Wang Mantian fish lanterns in Huizhou through an iconographic approach, exploring their formal features, symbolic meanings, and cultural connotations, while simultaneously examining the role of local cultural governance in their preservation, transmission, and transformation. It seeks to evaluate how the lanterns have maintained aesthetic stability amid changing governance mechanisms and socio-economic contexts, and to assess their contribution to sustainable development by reinforcing cultural identity, promoting rural revitalization, and supporting community participation. Ultimately, the study intends to propose a governance-oriented framework that integrates folkloric aesthetics and intangible heritage management, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for policymakers, local administrators, and practitioners working at the intersection of cultural preservation and local development.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### ***3.1 Iconography, pictorialism, and ethnic art***

The analytical tradition of iconography has played a foundational role in the interpretation of visual culture. Ernst Panofsky, regarded as the “father of modern iconography,” developed a three-level framework that remains highly influential in art historical scholarship (Zhang, 2019). His method distinguishes between pre-iconographic description (the perceptible surface features of images such as color, form, and ornament), iconographic analysis (the identification of symbolic content and narrative structures), and iconological interpretation (the uncovering of deeper cultural meanings and socio-historical significance) (Yang, 2010). This multi-layered approach allows for a comprehensive reading of artistic forms, linking visual expression to the cultural and social systems in which it is embedded.

In recent years, iconographic methods have been increasingly applied to the study of ethnic and folk art, offering a lens to examine how symbolic forms embody collective belief systems and cultural identities. For example, Xie (2020) demonstrates that the horsehair embroidery patterns of the Miao ethnic group encode aesthetic concepts inseparable from ethnic identity and worldview. Similarly, Chen (2024), in her research on Bai tie-dye butterfly motifs, argues that religious belief, village cultural atmosphere, and intercultural fusion are central to the endurance of these visual forms. Such studies highlight how ethnic art forms are not merely decorative objects but repositories of cultural choice and collective memory (Hu et al., 2021). Iconography, therefore, provides a methodological bridge for understanding how artistic symbols sustain ethnic identity, cultural continuity, and intergenerational transmission.

#### ***3.2 Wang Mantian fish lanterns and folk aesthetics***

The concept of “folk aesthetics” provides an additional theoretical perspective for analyzing traditional practices such as the Wang Mantian fish lanterns. Unlike folklore studies that focus primarily on customs and rituals, folk aesthetics emphasizes the aesthetic relationships between human communities and their cultural expressions. It is characterized by ethnicity, temporality, locality, and inheritance—qualities that reflect both material form and subjective experience (Song, 1986). As Gao and Ge (1995) note, folk aesthetics evolves through a dynamic process of accumulation, filtration, and re-creation across generations, reflecting both objective cultural

practices and subjective aesthetic consciousness.

The Wang Mantian fish lanterns of Shexian County illustrate this duality. Originating from the community's agrarian life and ritual practices, they embody distinctive local characteristics while simultaneously functioning as aesthetic objects shaped by the gaze of diverse audiences (Zhang & Qu, 2021). As the tradition has moved beyond its local ritual setting into broader cultural and tourism domains, the fish lanterns face the challenge of balancing local meanings with external aesthetic demands. This tension highlights the need to analyze not only their artistic form but also their role within broader cultural governance structures.

### ***3.3 Cultural governance and sustainable development***

While prior research has illuminated the aesthetic forms and symbolic dimensions of ethnic art and folk culture, fewer studies have examined how such practices are governed at the local level in the context of sustainable development. The Wang Mantian fish lanterns offer an instructive case: their stability as an artistic form coexists with evolving governance mechanisms, from community-based associations to government-led heritage and tourism initiatives. The intersection of iconographic aesthetics and governance raises important questions about how intangible heritage can be preserved, revitalized, and mobilized for rural development without succumbing to homogenization or commodification. This study addresses this gap by integrating iconographic analysis with a governance perspective, situating folkloric aesthetics within contemporary debates on cultural sustainability and local self-government.

## **4. Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to provide a comprehensive understanding of the folkloric aesthetics and governance implications of the Wang Mantian fish lantern tradition. A multi-method approach was employed to ensure data triangulation, combining field observation, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and document analysis. Secondary materials—including academic journals, books, and government policy documents—were integrated with primary field data to enhance validity and interpretive depth.

### ***4.1 Research site and context***

The field research was conducted in Wang Mantian Village, Xitou Town, She County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province, a traditional Huizhou settlement recognized as part of China's fifth batch of nationally protected historic villages. The village, with its "seven mountains, one water, and two fields" terrain, has preserved the Wang Mantian Fish Lantern tradition for over 600 years. This unique geographical and cultural environment has enabled the continuity of ritual practices and aesthetic forms, making the site an ideal case for investigating the relationship between intangible cultural heritage, community identity, and local governance.

### ***4.2 Research population and sampling***

The research population included intangible cultural heritage inheritors, craftsmen engaged in lantern production, cultural promoters, village residents, and tourists participating in the Fish Lantern Festival. Fieldwork was conducted in June 2024 and February 2025, during which the research team engaged in participant observation of lantern-making processes and the four-day Fish Lantern Festival. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to capture diverse perspectives from both

cultural bearers and external stakeholders.

#### **4.3 Data collection**

**Observation and Participation:** Researchers observed the full cycle of fish lantern creation and festival performance, documenting spatial arrangements, ritual sequences, and community interactions. Partial participation in the festival further enriched the experiential understanding of its cultural meaning.

**In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with cultural inheritors, craftsmen, villagers, local officials, and tourists. These interviews explored perceptions of the lanterns' artistic form, symbolic meaning, and governance challenges.

**Informal Conversations:** Unstructured dialogues with villagers and visitors provided additional insights into everyday attitudes toward the festival and its cultural value.

**Document Analysis:** Relevant literature, policy texts, and cultural promotion materials were reviewed to situate the field findings within broader governance and sustainability discourses.

#### **4.4 Analytical framework**

Data were analyzed using Panofsky's three-tiered iconographic method:

**Pre-iconographic description** to document the observable features of the fish lanterns, such as color, form, and ornamentation.

**Iconographic analysis** to interpret symbolic content and narratives embedded in the lanterns' imagery.

**Iconological interpretation** to uncover deeper cultural connotations and societal meanings, linking them to issues of governance, identity, and sustainable development.

This iconographic analysis was complemented by a governance lens, examining how local authorities, community associations, and external tourism forces influence the preservation, commercialization, and transmission of the fish lantern tradition.

#### **4.5 Contribution**

By combining iconographic analysis with qualitative field methods, the study clarifies the artistic forms, aesthetic connotations, social attributes, and governance dynamics of the Wang Mantian Fish Lantern Festival. The methodology aims to provide villagers, policymakers, tourists, and cultural institutions with a more accurate understanding of this heritage, supporting its sustainable development while safeguarding its regional identity and cultural integrity.

### **5. Results**

#### **5.1 Pre-iconographic description: forms, decorations, colours, and craft materials**

The first level of analysis focused on the external forms and formal aesthetics of Wang Mantian fish lanterns, documenting their structure, decoration, colour schemes, and craft techniques.






##### **5.1.1 Structural form**

The fish lanterns are modeled primarily on carp, with a rounded head, smooth body, and vivid proportions that produce both simplicity and dynamism (Table 1). Each lantern consists of five parts—head, body (front and rear), fins, and tail—joined by movable joints that allow for swimming-like movement during performance. Large festival lanterns can measure up to 13 meters, while small lanterns may be only 30 centimeters, with variations in fin numbers depending on size. A



unique derivative, the “carp-to-dragon lantern,” replaces the fish head with a dragon motif but otherwise retains the fish body structure.












Table 1. Structural components of fish lanterns.











Fish lantern as a whole	Fish head	Fish body	Fish fins	Fish tail
				

5.1.2 Decoration

Decoration is marked by simplicity and rhythmic balance. Six traditional patterns dominate: fish scales, the “Wang” character, ruyi, auspicious clouds, gourds, and fire motifs. The “Wang” pattern, placed boldly on the head, is a distinctive marker of the tradition. Other patterns are symmetrically arranged along fins and tails, symbolizing protection, good fortune, and resistance to misfortune (Table 2). While older artisans preserve traditional complexity, younger makers often simplify motifs for efficiency, showing ongoing adaptation without abandoning core imagery.

Table 2. Decorative patterns and placements.

Pattern	Representative form	Distribution location	Other forms		
Fish scale pattern		The entire fish body and part of the tail and fins			
Wang pattern		Fish head			
Ruyi pattern		Fish fins, fish tails			

<b>Auspicious cloud pattern</b>		Fish fins, fish tails			
<b>Gourd pattern</b>		Fish fins			
<b>Mountain fire pattern</b>		Fish tail, fish fins, fish head			

5.1.3 Colour

The lanterns follow the Chinese “five colours” tradition, with red, blue, and white as primary tones, supplemented by black, gold, and green. Red dominates, symbolizing both the suppression of fire (the lantern’s original function) and festivity. Blue often appears in flame or cloud patterns, while white alternates with red in fish scales to enhance elegance. Black is reserved for the “Wang” character and fish eyes, providing visual focus.

5.1.4 Craft materials

Production involves bamboo and wood frames, paper or fabric coverings, and hand-painted patterns (Figure 2). Frames are woven with local bamboo, surfaces traditionally pasted with paper but increasingly fabric, and designs painted with ink or acrylics. Lighting has shifted from candles to electric fixtures for safety. Local resource use, particularly bamboo harvesting, reflects the ecological basis of the craft.



Figure 2. Stages of lantern production (frame, paper, painting).

5.2 Iconographic analysis: symbols and stories

At the second level, iconographic analysis explored the symbolic narratives embedded in forms

and decorations.

5.2.1 Origins of the lantern tradition

Local oral traditions trace the lantern’s origin to fire-prevention rituals. Villagers attributed frequent fires to surrounding rock formations described as “fire mirrors” and used fish lanterns as symbolic water carriers to suppress fire (Figure 3). Carp and fish also carried connotations of abundance and fertility, embedding spiritual protection and agricultural hope in the tradition.





Figure 3: Fire Mirror rock wall location.


5.2.2 Symbolism of decorative patterns

Each decorative motif reflects collective meaning. The “Wang” pattern symbolizes authority and sacred protection. Fire motifs represent threats, yet their placement on lanterns paradoxically signifies control and suppression through fish-water imagery. Cloud, gourd, and ruyi motifs embody fortune, joy, and protection, highlighting the villagers’ aspiration for prosperity and safety (Table 3).

Table 3: Symbolic meaning of patterns.

Name	Pattern	Culture significance
“Wang” pattern		This pattern symbolizes the authority and sanctity of the fish god, warding off disasters and misfortune from the village and protecting the villagers' peace and tranquility.
Mountain fire pattern		This pattern symbolizes fire and is painted on various parts of the fish lantern, signifying the use of fish and water to control fire and prevent fires from occurring. This was also the original social demand and connotation of Wang Mantian fish lanterns.



Ruyi pattern, auspicious cloud pattern, gourd pattern		These three types of patterns are cultural symbols of good luck in traditional Chinese designs, with the meaning of bringing good fortune and warding off evil.
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5.2.3 Colour symbolism

Red, the dominant colour, simultaneously conveys danger (fire) and festivity, embodying resilience against disaster and celebration of life. Green symbolizes vitality and moral integrity, while blue suggests water’s protective force. These colours work collectively to encode both cosmological symbolism and community ethics.

5.3 Iconological interpretation: community identity and governance

At the third level, iconological analysis revealed the deeper cultural and governance significance of the fish lanterns.

5.3.1 Regional identity and belonging

Lantern rituals in Huizhou, historically widespread, are vividly represented in Wang Mantian (Figure 4). The village’s multi-surname population (Cheng, Ye, Wang) consolidated collective identity through fishing associations and lantern rituals, transforming kinship divisions into a shared symbolic community. Lanterns became vehicles of social integration, memory, and local identity.



Figure 4. Historic wood carvings of lantern festivals in Huizhou.

5.3.2 Sociality, totem worship, and spiritual beliefs

Fish lanterns function as community totems, anchoring villagers’ spiritual life and providing a sense of collective protection. The annual Lantern Festival, organized by six fishing associations, mobilizes nearly all households and involves craftsmen, performers, and cultural inheritors. Rituals reinforce Durkheim’s observation that ceremonies periodically renew social cohesion, making lanterns both artistic symbols and governance tools that bind the community (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Fish lantern ceremony and worship of the Fish God.

### 5.3.3 Historical and cultural symbolism

Over centuries, the lanterns have evolved from fire-prevention rituals into cultural emblems of resilience, optimism, and local governance. Decisions in fishing associations often mirror the lanterns' symbolism of vitality and competition, reinforcing democratic participation within traditional frameworks. This shows how folkloric aesthetics intersect with governance practices, embedding cultural values into everyday community life.

The three-tier iconographic analysis demonstrates that Wang Mantian fish lanterns operate simultaneously as aesthetic artifacts, symbolic carriers, and governance instruments. Their structural form and decoration reveal artistic continuity; their motifs and colours encode protective, spiritual, and aspirational meanings; and their ritual use fosters community integration, cultural resilience, and participatory governance. These results highlight how intangible cultural heritage contributes not only to cultural identity but also to the sustainability of local governance and development in Huizhou.

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of the Wang Mantian fish lanterns demonstrates that folkloric traditions cannot be understood solely as aesthetic objects but must also be recognized as elements of local cultural governance. Their resilience and continuity, despite political, economic, and social transformations, reflect an adaptive governance system that integrates ritual practice, community participation, and heritage policy. This section discusses the broader governance implications of the findings.

### 6.1 Cultural heritage governance as a foundation

At the most fundamental level, the fish lanterns embody the capacity of local communities to preserve and adapt intangible heritage across centuries. Their stable forms—structural design, decorative motifs, and colour symbolism—are not just artistic choices but mechanisms of cultural regulation. By embedding protective, auspicious, and communal values in lantern imagery, villagers

have effectively institutionalized their heritage in visual codes. This “aesthetic governance” ensured resilience during periods of cultural disruption and continues to function as a symbolic constitution of village life. In recent decades, state intervention—through intangible heritage designation and branding strategies—has reinforced this governance dimension, situating the fish lanterns within formal heritage management frameworks.

### ***6.2 Experiential tourism as a governance strategy***

The festivalization and tourism development of the fish lantern tradition illustrate how local authorities and community actors negotiate heritage’s role in the rural economy. The annual Lantern Festival attracts significant numbers of tourists, generating income but also raising concerns about cultural dilution. The fish lanterns’ symbolic depth—rooted in fire prevention, abundance, and communal identity—offers a foundation for experiential tourism that goes beyond superficial spectacle. When cultural meaning is retained and communicated through iconographic interpretation, tourism becomes a vehicle for sustaining identity while diversifying economic opportunities. In this sense, experiential tourism is not merely a market activity but a governance strategy for balancing preservation with development.

### ***6.3 Community participation and cultural resilience***

The case of Wang Mantian demonstrates that sustainable governance of intangible heritage depends on active community involvement. Fishing associations, lantern-making groups, and festival performers collectively embody a participatory governance model, where decision-making, ritual organization, and cultural production are distributed across the village. This structure fosters both social cohesion and intergenerational transmission, ensuring that heritage is reproduced not only as performance but also as a living governance mechanism. Such community-driven structures resonate with broader theories of self-government, where legitimacy derives from bottom-up participation rather than top-down regulation.

### ***6.4 Toward a governance pathway model***

The findings point to a replicable pathway: Cultural Heritage Governance → Experiential Tourism → Local Sustainable Development. In this model, the preservation and symbolic embedding of heritage serve as the foundation. Experiential tourism provides the strategic mechanism for aligning cultural identity with economic vitality. The outcome is sustainable local development, characterized by social cohesion, cultural resilience, and diversified livelihoods. This pathway demonstrates how local self-government can transform intangible heritage into a resource for both identity and prosperity, while maintaining fidelity to cultural authenticity.

### ***6.5 Policy and governance implications***

For policymakers and local administrators, the Wang Mantian case underscores the importance of integrating cultural heritage governance into rural revitalization strategies. First, policies should prioritize safeguarding aesthetic and symbolic integrity rather than reducing heritage to commodified spectacle. Second, mechanisms for community participation must be institutionalized, ensuring that heritage bearers and local associations remain central in governance. Third, branding and tourism promotion should emphasize experiential depth, linking visitors not only to the lanterns’ visual appeal but also to their historical, spiritual, and communal meanings. Finally, multi-level governance—linking village committees, county cultural bureaus, and provincial heritage

offices—should coordinate efforts to balance cultural sustainability with economic development.

## 7. Conclusion

The Wang Mantian fish lanterns exemplify how folkloric aesthetics and cultural symbolism can serve as resources for local cultural governance and sustainable development. Through iconographic analysis, this study has shown that the lanterns' structural forms, decorative motifs, colour symbolism, and craft traditions embody not only aesthetic continuity but also deep-rooted communal values and spiritual beliefs. These visual and ritual elements have historically functioned as mechanisms of resilience, enabling the community to preserve its identity and adapt to external changes.

The findings highlight a governance pathway whereby cultural heritage governance provides the foundation, experiential tourism operates as a strategy, and sustainable rural development emerges as the outcome. Within this model, the fish lanterns function simultaneously as cultural artifacts, social bonds, and governance tools. Their continued vitality demonstrates the potential of intangible heritage to bridge the goals of cultural preservation, community participation, and economic revitalization.

For policymakers and practitioners, the case underscores the need to strengthen community-led governance structures, safeguard symbolic and aesthetic integrity, and design tourism strategies that emphasize cultural depth rather than superficial spectacle. By aligning heritage management with local self-government, intangible cultural traditions such as the Wang Mantian fish lanterns can be transformed into sustainable assets that promote both cultural resilience and rural prosperity.

The study suggests that the integration of iconographic analysis with governance perspectives offers a replicable framework for other heritage-rich communities worldwide. It affirms that the sustainable future of intangible cultural heritage lies not only in its preservation but also in its capacity to act as a living resource for local governance, identity formation, and development.

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