

Forging “Meaning”: The Social Life and Re-invention of Wuhu Iron Painting in China

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ABSTRACT

This research is basic, taking the iron painting in Wuhu, Anhui Province, China as the research text, using the qualitative research methods of literature analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participatory observation to carry out the research. Based on the two theoretical perspectives of “social life of things” and “re-invention of tradition”, this study investigated the evolution of the identity and significance of “Wuhu iron painting” over the past 340 years. Through analysis of its production, circulation, and consumption across three social and historical periods, the study found that Wuhu iron painting underwent a complex process of identity evolution, evolving from an artwork into a national political symbol. Finally, it became a medium for multi-agent participation in meaning-making. In the pre-modern period, Wuhu iron painting was an elegant art form enjoyed by the literati and scholars, serving as a carrier of their cultural capital and expressing the cultural identity of intellectuals in feudal society. In the 1950s-1970s, it was endowed by the government with connotations of collectivism and national symbolism, serving ideological education and the shaping of a socialist national identity. Following reform and opening-up, Wuhu iron painting became enmeshed in three intersecting contexts: market-driven commodification, the balancing act between “upholding tradition” and “pursuing innovation” under intangible cultural heritage policies, and young, personalized demands driven by consumerism. Under this background, the production, circulation and consumption of Wuhu iron painting underwent profound differentiation. A single authority no longer assigned its meaning but was dynamically generated through interaction and negotiation among the government, inheritors, iron-painting brands, consumers and local enterprises. Consequently, the identity of iron painting transitioned from “artwork” to “cultural commodity” and then to “medium for expressing identity and emotions”. This study shows that the identity and value of Wuhu iron painting have never been fixed. Instead, they have been constantly re-constructed in different historical and social contexts through the renewal and innovation of traditional techniques.

Keywords: Anhui Wuhu Iron Painting, Social Life of Things, Re-invention of Tradition, Meaning Change, Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

The study of Wuhu iron paintings can generally be categorized into four research pathways. First, research on the origin, history, craftsmanship, and aesthetic characteristics of Wuhu iron paintings, with representative works by Pang (2016), Li (2017), Liu (2013), and Liu (2022). Second, studies exploring strategies and pathways for the inheritance and development of Wuhu iron paintings from practical application and policy perspectives, including market systems and mechanisms, training of inheritors, and institutional development, are represented by Chen (2011), Ding and Huang (2016), Wang (2017), Zhu and Wang (2020), and Wang (2024). Third, some scholars with backgrounds in architecture or design explore the potential of Wuhu iron paintings in these fields through their expertise. They analyze the innovative design and modern applications of iron painting in contemporary design, including research by Li (2024), Guo (2024), and Chen (2025). Fourth, some scholars in media research study the dissemination of Wuhu iron paintings on new media, as reflected in the research findings of Ma and

Fang (2020), Chen & Zhu (2022), and Ma & Fan (2023).

Although a lot of progress has been made, there are still deficiencies in the existing research: on the one hand, there is a lack of sufficient historical background to understand the cultural significance of iron painting; On the other hand, local views on cultural heritage, social networks, and consumer behavior were not fully considered. To address these deficiencies, this study integrates the two theoretical perspectives of “social life of things” and “re-invention of tradition” and aims to answer the following research questions. First, by tracing the production, circulation, and consumption of Wuhu iron painting in three different social and historical periods, this research intends to answer a series of questions, such as “What kind of social life has Wuhu iron painting experienced? What changes has its meaning and identity experienced? Why are there such changes? Second, by revealing the construction process and power dynamics behind the definition of “authentic” iron painting across periods, this study tries to answer the question: “How is the tradition of iron painting made?” This study regards Wuhu iron painting as a cultural object with a complete social life cycle, traces its different stages over approximately 340 years, and reveals the reconstruction of its meanings and identities across time and space, as well as the social roots of these changes. To achieve the research objectives, this study employed a qualitative approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework of “social life of things” (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Gell, 1998) posits that material objects have a dynamic life course, and their value and cultural significance are continually shaped and modified through circulation. Kopytoff (1986) proposed the concept of “Cultural Biography” to clarify how the symbolic meaning of artifacts is reinterpreted each time they are exchanged and enter a new social environment. Gell (1998) also endowed material objects with social initiative, regarding them as active participants in social interaction.

The theoretical innovation is mainly reflected in three aspects: first, giving things social initiative, thinking that things can trigger social action, maintain relations, and bear memory; Second, deconstructing the inherent myth of value and revealing the complex cultural politics and power struggle behind it; Third, it advocates the multi-point ethnographic path of “following things” in methodology. Several empirical studies, such as Mintz (1985), Morphy (1991, 2000), and Zhang (2014), have observed similar phenomena: local traditional artifacts are gradually transformed into solid cultural symbols through continuous circulation and social use.

In addition, Hall (1997) and Foucault (1977) provided analytical methods for examining the implicit power mechanisms in these theoretical resources. The “politics of representation” is primarily elaborated by Stuart Hall and other scholars, who argue that any “representation” of reality through symbols, images, and narratives is not a neutral process but a political field of power struggles and meaning-making. Its theoretical origin can be traced back to Foucault’s analysis of “discourse power”. The theory has been widely used to examine race and gender politics in media representation, authoritative narration in museums and heritage practice, and local cultural symbolization in tourism development.

In this study, through the investigation of the change and development of the symbolic meaning of Wuhu iron painting in the past three hundred and forty years, we found that the modern survival of traditional crafts is essentially a process in which its meaning is constantly negotiated, contested, and reconstructed in the field of dynamic cultural power.

The concept of “invention of tradition” proposed by Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) provides us with an additional interpretive tool. They refer to those rituals or symbolic systems that seem ancient but have a relatively recent origin, are deliberately constructed in response to the social, political, or economic needs of a specific era, and are then quickly consolidated into “traditional”. “Invention of tradition” is a core mechanism and dynamic process in the “reproduction of ideology” (Althusser, 1971; 2014). This concept subverts the cultural view of essentialism. It emphasizes that tradition is not a constant continuation, but a product of the dynamic operation of contemporary power and the construction of identity. The follow-up scholars enriched this: Handler (1986; 1996) discussed the paradox of “authenticity”; Smith (2006), on the other hand, revealed the logic of positioning the West as the center and the elite as the leader in heritage construction through the “authoritative heritage discourse”.

This theoretical framework effectively guides us in identifying the power field behind the symbolic meaning of iron painting and helps us ask: why is Wuhu iron painting emphasized as a “political gift” in one period, but highlighted as a “commodity” or “artistic” in another? This theory reinterprets the “inheritance” and “development” of Wuhu iron painting as a continuous, tensile process of “re-invention”, rather than passively guarding a solidified heritage. Therefore, we can only truly grasp the logic of the existence of iron painting as a living heritage if we continue to pay attention to how it is “re-invented” at every turning point of its “social life”.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research method, with field investigation as the overall strategy (Knowles & Cole, 2008). It employs three techniques: literature research, participatory observation, and semi-structured in-depth interviews, aiming to conduct a “Thick Description” of the social life history and inheritance status of Wuhu iron paintings (Geertz, 1973). Data collection is from July 2024 to August 2025. This research uses the two theoretical tools, “social life of things” and “re-invention of tradition,” to analyze the collected data in depth.

The literature review mainly focuses on three aspects. First, I consulted historical documents, local chronicles, and specialized publications on Wuhu iron painting, thereby obtaining information on its origin, production techniques, representative artists, and historical development. Second, search the CNKI database for journal articles to understand the current state of research in this field and find academic research gaps. Third, online surveys were conducted by browsing the official government website, the Wuhu City Cultural and Tourism Bureau homepage, and major social media platforms, including Douyin (TikTok) and WeChat. These online resources help me understand the different marketing strategies adopted by the three major brands of Chu’s, Feilong, and Huiyifang, and provide the latest news on the Wuhu municipal government, local enterprises, iron painting studios, artisans, and consumers.

The author conducted in-depth interviews with 16 key participants, each lasting 40 to 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data. The interviewees had various backgrounds, including the national intangible cultural heritage inheritor (Chu Jinxia), two provincial-level inheritors (Chu Tieyi, Ye He), the Secretary General of Wuhu Iron Painting Association (Shen Tao), two representatives of Feilong iron painting (founder Gao Wenqing and new media operation director), the founder of Huiyifang iron painting studio, Mr. Dan, three owners of Xiaojiuhua commercial street, and six consumers of iron painting. The interview mainly focuses on personal experience, views on improving skills and integrating tradition and innovation, consumer preferences, and willingness to buy/customize iron painting works, etc., to fully understand the industry’s situation at different levels.

This study also used the participatory observation method. The main field survey was conducted in Wuhu City, Anhui Province, focusing on eight important locations: Zheshan Iron Painting Museum, Feilong Iron Painting Shop in Huajie of Wuhu Ancient City, Jiuzi ancient town, Feilong Iron Painting Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage Workshop (located in the Chinese iron painting creative park), Chu Jinxia studio, Chu’s iron painting provincial intangible cultural heritage workshop (located in Anhui Mechanical and Electrical Vocational and Technical College), Xiaojiuhua Commercial Street, and Huiyifang Iron Painting Shop. The field survey was carried out in three stages (July 2024, January 2025, and August 2025) and lasted a total of 15 days in Wuhu. During this period, the author observed the production process of iron paintings at the Chu’s iron painting workshop and the Feilong iron painting workshop, and observed consumer behavior and purchasing habits at tourist attractions (such as Wuhu ancient city and Jiuzi ancient town) and on Xiaojiuhua commercial street. Detailed field notes were recorded daily to capture situational information and preliminary findings during fieldwork.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Elegant Appreciation: The Literati Consumption of Wuhu Iron Painting in the Pre-Modern Period (Early Qing Dynasty-1949)

This section traces the earliest phase of iron painting’s life trajectory. I quote Kopytoff’s (1986) theory on “the cultural biography of things”. He mentions that objects fall into two categories: “commodities,” which can be traded and assessed, and “singular” things, which are highly valued, either as sacred or valuable. In the pre-modern period, iron painting was not widely available. It was produced and consumed within a restricted circle of literati and officials. At that period, it was more “singularized”, not treated as a usual commodity. Instead, it was regarded as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986), showing the owner’s taste and social status. It also represents the owner’s culture and social position.

The Production of Wuhu Iron Painting: Individual Master Artisans and Small-Scale Workshops

1. Socioeconomic and Cultural Background of Gestation

Wuhu Iron Painting is a distinctive art form crafted from low-carbon steel through forging, welding, shaping, and painting, combining the artistic conception of traditional Chinese painting with three-dimensional sculptural beauty. Its emergence was rooted in three reasons. First, Wuhu had over four millennia of metallurgical history. By the post-Song period, the city was already known for the saying, “iron becomes steel as soon as it reaches

Wuhu.”During the Ming and Qing dynasties, it developed into a major steel center in Jiangnan (Pang, 2016). Second, as a Yangtze River port and one of the “Four Great Rice Markets,” Wuhu enjoyed commercial prosperity, attracting merchants and literati. The late Ming-to-early Qing gathering of the Gushu Painting School offered artisans direct exposure to the aesthetics of literati painting. Thirdly, frustrated literati and anti-Qing patriots, coupled with a relatively open civilian economy, to some extent broke barriers to cross-class interaction between blacksmiths and elite intellectuals, directly giving rise to the art form of iron painting (Li, 2017).

2. The Birth of Wuhu Iron Painting

The formal birth of iron painting is widely recognized as the artistic collaboration between the blacksmith Tang Peng (courtesy name Tianchi) and the painter Xiao Yuncong during the Kangxi reign (1662-1722) of the Qing dynasty.

Early Wuhu iron painting, or “iron flower,” was a practical decorative technique used on ironware such as lamp screens and candlesticks (Figure 1). As a transport hub near Mount Jiuhua, Wuhu attracted pilgrims who bought iron flower lanterns as offerings. Blacksmiths thus specialized in three-dimensional iron flower lanterns with auspicious motifs such as lotuses, plums, and bamboo, which they sold locally and as far as Mount Wudang.



Figure 1. Iron Painting in Imitation of Ming and Qing Dynasty Lamp Screens. [Source: Photo by the author at the Zheshan Iron Painting Museum, Wuhu, July 19, 2024]

In the early Qing, Tang Peng (Figure 2a) moved from Li Shui, Jiangsu, to Wuhu to learn the craft and later established his own iron workshop, producing ironware and iron flower lanterns. Around the same time, the painter Xiao Yuncong (1596-1673) (Figure 2b), living in seclusion in Wuhu, founded the Guhu painting school and enlivened the local art scene. Against this backdrop of convergence between craftsmanship and literati art, Tang Peng received meticulous guidance from Xiao Yuncong, who not only provided painting drafts but also taught him the essence of brushwork. Tang successfully integrated the art of forging with the artistic conception of literati painting, creating works described as “iron for bones and flesh, painting for the soul” (Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office, 2024).



Figure 2. (a) Tang Peng, the Blacksmith and (b) Xiao Yuncong, the Painter. [Source: Photos by the author at the Zheshan Iron Painting Museum, Wuhu, July 19, 2024]

3. The Technical Process of Wuhu Iron Painting

The production process of Wuhu iron painting can be roughly divided into 5 stages. The first stage is design and material selection. First, the artist drew a detailed design sketch and selected low-carbon steel as the primary material. The second stage is forging and shaping. According to the design sketch, the craftsman will cut and grind the iron sheet or bar, and use chisels and hammers for fine carving and hammering to form the preliminary shape and a three-dimensional sense in iron painting. Two different forging methods will be involved in this stage. One is hot forging: heat the metal sheet to a red-hot state, then hammer repeatedly on the anvil to form a three-dimensional shape and create various surface textures. The other method is cold forging and embossing. Cold forging involves shaping the object through hammering at room temperature. The embossing process changes the appearance from both sides, adding depth and texture to the picture. The third stage is welding and shaping. Weld all the components together, then refine the welded iron paintings to eliminate deformities and defects. The fourth stage is annealing and surface treatment. Place the iron paintings in an annealing furnace, then coat the surface to prevent corrosion and enhance luster. The final stage is framing and self-inspection. Install the coated iron paintings in a frame and conduct a comprehensive quality inspection to ensure they meet the design requirements and quality standards (Anhui Province Traditional Chinese Culture Research, 2025).

Subject Matter and Consumption Characteristics of Wuhu Iron Painting

Since literati paintings served as the natural draft for forging iron paintings, the themes of iron paintings align closely with the literati painting tradition. The main subjects include flowers and birds, fish and insects, and landscapes. Among floral subjects, the “Four Gentlemen” (plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum) (Figure 3) are particularly favored. These natural objects, through the aesthetic perception of the literati, acquire certain ideal qualities and integrity that intellectuals yearn for. Consequently, in the process of circulation and consumption, iron paintings were endowed by the scholar-official class with symbolic meanings that served to manifest the literati’s moral fortitude, noble character, and their yearning for a reclusive life. Generally, buyers of such paintings, including literati officials, government officers, and wealthy merchants, use them as gifts at literary gatherings or hang them in their rooms to display their social status and to collect cultural artifacts (Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office, 2024). Therefore, in its ancient biography, iron painting has been successfully “individualized” (Kopytoff, 1986). It has been separated from the common market transaction and given aesthetic and moral values.



Figure 3. “Four Seasons of Flowers and Birds” (Four-panel Screen). Dimensions: 107 cm × 36 cm. The original work, forged by Tang Peng, is housed in the Palace Museum and is designated as a National First-Class Cultural Relic. The image above is a reproduction. [Source: Photo by the author at the Zheshan Iron Painting Museum, Wuhu, July 19, 2024]

During the Qing Dynasty’s Qianlong and Jiaqing periods, iron painting reached its first peak of popularity. During this period, Huang Yue (1750-1841), a Qing Dynasty literati, played a significant role. Huang Yue’s great-grandfather happened to own the house that Tang Tianchi rented back then. During a home visit to see his relatives, Huang Yue presented the family’s iron painting to Emperor Qianlong, who was deeply impressed and made it famous worldwide. Iron workers in Wuhu eagerly imitated and forged the art. Additionally, a group of high-ranking officials and talented scholars from south of the Yangtze River in Beijing also had a great fondness for iron painting and composed poems praising its elegant charm. It should be said that the esteem and affection of officials, merchants, and gentry for iron painting became the driving force behind its development (Pang,

2016). By the Jiaqing period, the popularity and development of iron painting reached its peak during the feudal era.

After 1895, Wuhu, as a treaty port, became a hub for merchants, and iron paintings gained the favor and admiration of foreign missionaries and merchants. Traditional iron paintings provide a window into traditional agricultural civilization and “Oriental art”. The themes of iron paintings gradually shifted from introspective, literati-centered subjects to more vivid scenes of Oriental folk life. Taking Shen Yixing Ironware Store (Figure 4), founded in 1881 by Shen Guohua, as an example, the store produced a set of works titled “Fishing, Woodcutting, Farming, and Scholars”. This theme particularly attracted foreign buyers because of its ancient agricultural culture. The work (Figure 5) was forged by Shen Dejin (son of Shen Guohua). It is currently in the collection of Zhou Yiping, Shen Dejin’s grandson, who resides in Wuhan. This set of iron paintings is unfinished and unmounted. Through these foreign missionaries and merchants, iron paintings spread to Western Europe, sparking a brief export boom and pushing this craft into the global network of cultural commodities (Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office, 2024).

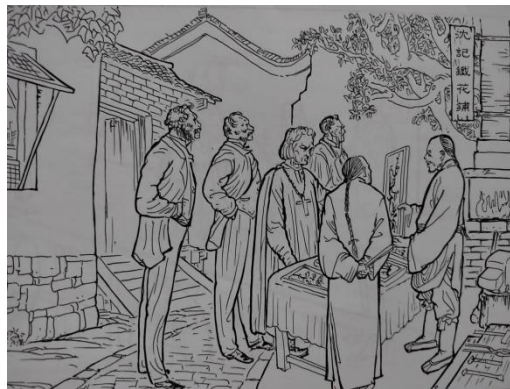


Figure 4. The Shen Yixing Ironware Shop at Sima (Temple Wharf) in Wuhu, attracting foreign missionaries and merchants. [Source: From *An Illustrated History of Wuhu Iron Painting* (p. 58), by Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office and Wuhu Municipal Committee of Cultural and Historical Data of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Eds.), 2024, Anhui Normal University Press]



Figure 5. (a) The Fisherman, (b) The Woodcutter, (c) The Farmer, (d) and The Scholar. [Source: From *An Illustrated History of Wuhu Iron Painting* (pp. 137-139), by Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office and Wuhu Municipal Committee of Cultural and Historical Data of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Eds.), 2024, Anhui Normal University Press]

During the Republic of China era (1912-1949), persistent social turmoil and economic depression led to the closure of most ironworks. Many artisans were forced to switch trades, and the few surviving workshops relied primarily on producing knives, scissors, and farming tools, plunging the industry into another period of decline.

Early Wuhu iron paintings, with their landscapes, flowers, and birds, and their solitary, vigorous, and stern style, resonated with the hearts of the scholar-official class, and iron paintings became a code for self-identity expression and recognition within the feudal scholar-official class. With Wuhu’s opening as a trading port, to cater to the exotic tastes of the colonial trade era, Wuhu iron paintings began to feature themes of traditional agrarian civilization and “Oriental culture”. The consumption of iron paintings shifted from satisfying the spiritual and aesthetic pursuits of the local scholar-official class to fulfilling the exotic imagination of foreign missionaries and merchants about the “mysterious Orient”. It means that iron painting began to shift from an artistic work to a

distinct commodity.

The Collective and National Symbol: The Politicized Forging of Wuhu Iron Painting in the Mao Era (1950s-1970s)

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the special social context of the Mao Zedong era had a wide and profound impact on the development of iron painting. During this period, social customs became increasingly political and collective. In the economy, a highly centralized planned system is implemented, and in social classes, a system with workers, farmers, and soldiers as the main groups is formed. The State implements the policy of “critical inheritance” of traditional culture, removes feudal dross, and selectively absorbs excellent national cultural heritage to build socialism.

Drawing on the theories of Foucault (1977) and Hall (1997), this study investigates changes in Wuhu iron painting during the Mao era. Foucault’s discussion of the relationship between power and knowledge shows that power is not only exercised through repression but also constructed, shaping social classifications, cultural connotations, and individual identities. According to Hall’s representation theory, the meaning of things is not inherent, but is composed of symbolic systems such as language, visual images, and public discourse. According to these theories, the organs of state power intend to make Wuhu iron painting an important political symbol of the socialist collective. This art form reinvented or abandoned the traditional literati style, making it a tool for promoting socialist ideology and national identity. Its cultural value was completely reconstructed to meet the official ideological requirements.

Production System: From Private Individual Workshops to Planned State-Operated Production

The last descendant of the Wuhu iron paintings, Shen Dejin (the son of Shen Guohua), passed away in 1951, leaving no children to carry on with the profession. Chu Yanqing (1902-1974) learned the basic skills of iron paintings in Shen Yixing’s workshop during the 1920s. Before 1949, he operated an iron store named “Chu Yongchang” in Zongyang and Wuhu, Anhui Province (Wuhu Archives, 2017).

In 1955, with the help of the Party and the government, the Wuhu Municipal Government established a team to restore iron paintings to preserve the traditional method. In 1956, iron painting was revived in Wuhu, and the State-owned Wuhu Art Factory was officially established. All private blacksmith shops in the city were joined into the state system (Pang, 2016). Since then, iron painting has been separated from the individual market and has developed into a form of ‘organized, planned and specialized’ collective production. During this time, Chu Yanqing trained a new group of collective craftsmen, including the “Eight Major Disciples” (see Figure 6; Wuhu Archives, 2017). In the 1970s, the introduction of spot-welding machines significantly improved both the production techniques and working conditions.



Figure 6. Chu Yanqing and his “Eight Major Disciples.” [Source: [From *Archives Reveal·Wuhu Iron Painting*] From a “Little Blacksmith” in the Old Society to the Founder of Wuhu Iron Painting in New China — Chu Yanqing by Wuhu Archives, 2017, January 13, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LA3hw-vGgoFNZdBft5F5Uw>)]

Thematic Content: The Aesthetic Transformation from Literati Sensibilities to Revolutionary and National Narratives

Foucault’s (1977) concept of “discipline power” provides a useful analytical tool for studying changes in the theme of Wuhu iron painting. In Foucault’s view, the power of discipline can also operate subtly by ignoring those who do not conform to established rules and emphasizing those who do, thereby promoting consistency. This process is evident in Wuhu iron paintings: themes inconsistent with socialist ideology, such as literati landscape

painting and hermit thought, have been gradually eliminated or reinvented. Instead, there were new themes, including revolutionary model dramas, scenes of socialist construction, ordinary and glorious mass laborers and heroic portraits - all of which were in line with the mainstream ideology at that time.

Hall's (1997) theory of "representation" also deepened the study of Wuhu iron painting in the era of Mao Zedong. At that time, iron painting not only remained a handicraft but also became an important symbolic expression. It is used to show the strength of the socialist country, the creativity of the Chinese people and the vision of a new society. For example, the iron painting "Welcoming Guest Pine" (Figure 7) is, on the surface, an ironwork that represents pine trees, a common theme in Chinese art. However, in that era, it took on profound political symbolism, signifying China's openness and hospitality under the socialist system. As a result, it was recognized by Premier Zhou Enlai (Figure 8).



Figure 7. The Giant Iron Painting "Welcoming Guest Pine" in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing. [Source: *Archives Reveal·Wuhu Iron Painting*] From a "Little Blacksmith" in the Old Society to the Founder of Wuhu Iron Painting in New China — Chu Yanqing by Wuhu Archives, 2017, January 13, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LA3hw-vGgoFNZdBft5F5Uw>)]



Figure 8. Premier Zhou Enlai with foreign guests in the reception area of the Great Hall of the People, with the "Welcoming Guest Pine" iron painting as the background. [Source: *From Classic Work Appreciation | The Iron Painting "Welcoming Guest Pine" in the Great Hall of the People* by Wuhu Arts and Crafts Factory, 2021, May 26, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/5wD4JVqLLXVGfWjLPeMSFA>)]

The change in the topic clearly indicates the current trend. Iron painting has departed from the literati tradition of the "Four Gentlemen" and landscape painting, which represented ideals of seclusion and individual expression. It has completely adopted the principle of 'combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism'.

The specific themes can be classified into four categories: first, changes in traditional styles. For example, the giant iron painting screen "Welcoming Guest Pine" (Figure 7) in the Great Hall of the People measures 4.7 meters in length and 2.7 meters in width and weighs approximately 200 kilograms. It was designed by Professor Wang Shicen and manufactured by Chu Yanqing and his disciples for the PRC's 10th anniversary in 1959. It was praised by Premier Zhou Enlai as the "iron-wrought Welcoming Pine," symbolizing the vitality of the country and the hospitality of the Chinese people (Wuhu Arts and Crafts Factory, 2021). Secondly, the promotion of socialist construction is evident in works such as "Meishan Reservoir" and "Delighted to see our nation's pillars surging forward" (Figure 9), which depict modern engineering and industrial achievements. The third theme is about

revolutionary history and heroic figures. For instance, “Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy” (Figure 10) and “Shajiabang” (Figure 11) — both taken from the ‘model operas’-are intended to glorify the armed struggle and establish role models for the public. They positively depict the wisdom and steadfast faith of revolutionaries, embodying a distinctive style of revolutionary romanticism. Finally, they reflect the people’s new life in the New China. Pictures such as “New People of Guozhuang” (Figure 12a) and “Acupuncture in the Fields” (Figure 12b) portray new socialist individuals and lifestyles and serve as propaganda (Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office, 2024).



Figure 9. “Delighted to See Our Nation’s Pillars Surging Forward” (1970s). [Source: From *An Illustrated History of Wuhu Iron Painting* (p. 156), by Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office and Wuhu Municipal Committee of Cultural and Historical Data of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Eds.), 2024, Anhui Normal University Press]



Figure 10. Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (1970s). [Source: From *An Illustrated History of Wuhu Iron Painting* (p. 151), by Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office and Wuhu Municipal Committee of Cultural and Historical Data of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (Eds.), 2024, Anhui Normal University Press]



Figure 11. Shajiabang (1970s). [Source: Photo by the author at the Zheshan Iron Painting Museum, Wuhu, July 19, 2024]

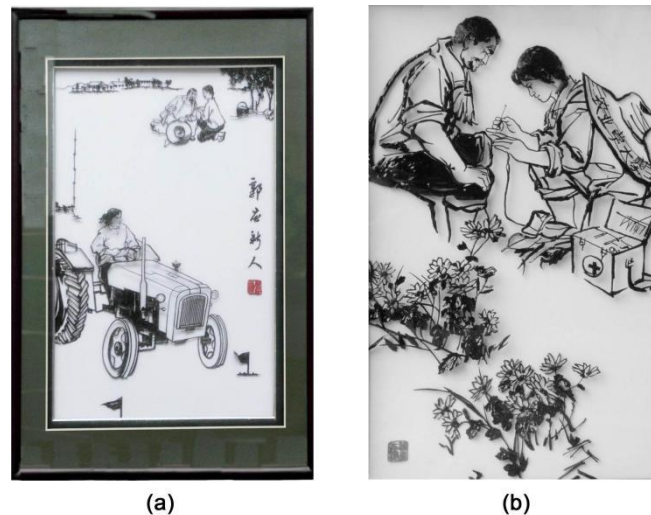


Figure 12. (a) New People of Guozhuang (1970s); (b) Acupuncture in the Fields (1970s). [Source: From An Illustrated History of Wuhu Iron Painting (pp. 157, 153), by Wuhu Municipal Party Committee History and Local Chronicles Research Office and Wuhu Municipal Committee of Cultural and Historical Data of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Eds.), 2024, Anhui Normal University Press]

Circulation and Consumption under State Power: The Dual Symbolization of Wuhu Iron Painting (1950s-1970s)

1. Circulation Network: From Folk Markets to the State-Directed Dual Circulation System

The circulation network originated as a “state-sponsored” cultural product: in 1958 and 1959, iron paintings such as “Mountain Snow Clearing”, “Pine and Eagle”, and “The Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden with Joyous Faces” were shown in Hungary and France as representatives of “socialist China” and “peaceful coexistence” (Wuhu Archives, 2017).

Later, political orders strictly controlled circulation — they were forbidden during the early Cultural Revolution (1966) as “feudal, bourgeois, revisionist.” According to the author’s interview recollections with Chu Jinxia, the daughter of Chu Yanqing and a national-level inheritor of intangible cultural heritage, on August 11, 2025, all iron-painting artisans were forced to change careers. Her father, Chu Yanqing, was not spared either and was only assigned to guard the gates of the merged Wuhu Automobile and Electrical Machinery Factory. During the interview, Chu Jinxia spoke softly when recalling this incident. She told the author that during that time, “my father was extremely depressed inside,” not only had to guard the gates but also endured criticism and humiliation, but he never gave up his love for iron painting and continued to hone his skills in private. This experience constitutes a dual narrative of the rupture and continuation of the “social life” of iron paintings during the Mao Zedong era - on the one hand, political forces forcibly interrupted the normal circulation of iron paintings; On the other hand, craftsmen maintain the survival of their skills in their private spaces, preserving the spark for the resumption of production in 1971.

Production was officially restarted on November 19, 1971, following Premier Zhou Enlai’s instruction that arts and crafts could earn foreign exchange. After the restart, a two-track system appeared: one for external circulation to obtain foreign exchange (such as 2,640 iron paintings exported at the 1973 Canton Fair, the first large-scale export) and another for internal circulation to propagate, including works based on model operas such as “Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy” and “Shajiabang”(Pang, 2016).

2. The Consumption Meaning: From Status Symbol to Dual Political and National Signifiers

In China, Wuhu iron paintings adorn public spaces such as halls, government offices, and foreign-related hotels. Consuming (receiving and viewing) iron paintings is an act of political education and revolutionary cultural edification, shaping the Chinese people’s recognition of New China’s achievements. As export commodities and gifts for foreign affairs, iron paintings are consumed as symbols of “unique oriental socialist art” and “the new cultural creativity of the Chinese nation”. Therefore, the consumption of iron paintings during this period is essentially a dual symbolic act of national ideology and national image, with individual tastes and collecting motivations replaced by collective political and cultural identification.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, state power shaped every aspect of Wuhu iron painting production, circulation, and consumption: from collective forging in state-owned factories to planned distribution as a national gift to its

interpretation as a socialist cultural symbol. This traditional craft was transformed into a new artistic product that shaped the image of the socialist New China as a nation-state. The “tradition” of Wuhu iron painting in the feudal era was changed. It is through the reinvention and reproduction of the traditional art of Wuhu iron painting with historical continuity (such as the introduction of new thematic content and aesthetic styles) that Wuhu iron painting fulfilled its mission of reproducing national ideology (Althusser, 1971). At the same time, Wuhu iron painting was characterized as socialist and collectivist during Mao Zedong’s era. The invention of tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) serves to reproduce national ideology. Tradition is not fixed but will be produced and reinvented in the new social context.

Symbols and Media: The Diversified Production of Meaning in Wuhu Iron Painting since the Reform and Opening-Up (1978-present)

After the reform and opening, the development of Wuhu iron painting entered a golden period. New forms, such as colored iron painting, porcelain-plate iron painting (Figure 13a), silver-plated iron painting, and gold-plated iron painting (Figure 13b), emerged. However, at the turn of the century, the Wuhu Arts and Crafts Factory declared bankruptcy as it transitioned to a corporate system, and iron painting production faced a crisis of transmission amid market-oriented experimentation.



Figure 13. (a) Porcelain-Plate Iron Painting “Panda Panpan”; (b) Pure Silver Iron Painting “Bamboo” and Gold-Plated Iron Painting “Welcoming Guest Pine”. [Source: Photos by the author at the Zheshan Iron Painting Museum, Wuhu, January 18, 2025]

The recognition of Intangible Cultural Heritage has given traditional crafts a new status. In 2006, Wuhu iron painting was included on China’s first national Intangible Cultural Heritage list; in 2011, Jinghu District was designated the “Home of Iron Painting Art”. With the assistance of government policies and market demands, the development of iron painting has been institutionalized. At the end of May 2026, approximately 200 craftsmen were involved in this industry, including two national-level inheritors, four provincial-level inheritors, and seven municipal-level inheritors (source: interview with Shen Tao, Secretary General of Wuhu Iron Painting Association, May 28, 2026).

To clarify this change, I refer to the concept of “invention of tradition” advanced by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). They mentioned that some customs and symbols that seem traditional and unalterable might be the result of modern inventions designed to meet current requirements. This phenomenon occurred after iron painting was officially designated as national intangible cultural heritage in 2006. The recognition not only preserves an old art but also provides a new value, ‘heritage’, to fulfill the present cultural and economic needs. In what follows, I will describe how various groups, such as inheritors, businesspeople, the government, and consumers, now attempt to interpret the concept of iron painting, turning it into what I call a “medium for generating meaning”.

Differentiation of the Production Field

First, the Intangible Cultural Heritage transmission system preserves the craft’s “orthodox” lineage and authentic value as a “cultural heritage.” Through “Intangible Cultural Heritage into campuses” and school-enterprise collaborations, iron painting has been curricularized in vocational education. For example, in 2015, Anhui Mechanical and Electrical Vocational College appointed Chu Jinxia, the daughter of Chu Yanqing, a National-level inheritor of Wuhu iron painting, as a visiting professor, and jointly established the Chu’s Iron Painting Intangible Heritage Workshop and the Chu Tieyi Studio (Figure 14a). Four universities in Wuhu have offered elective and compulsory courses, with over 400 students trained to date. Chu Jinxia promotes a parallel model of familial and social transmission, passing the craft to her children (including her nephew, Chu Tieyi, and

daughter, Chu Liwen), as well as to apprentices. Through her master studio and the 2016 National Arts Fund “Wuhu Iron Painting Art Talent Training” project, she trains young craftspeople nationwide through intensive, standardized courses that strictly replicate classic themes, thereby defining and defending the “orthodox” boundaries and aesthetic norms of Wuhu iron-painting forging techniques. The Chu’s Iron Painting Arts and Crafts Co., Ltd., founded by Chu Jinxia in 2004, declared “Chu’s Iron Painting” as a “China Time-Honored Brand”. In 2024, it was successfully selected for the third batch of the China Time-Honored Brand list since the founding of the New China (Figure 14b).



Figure 14. (a) Chu’s Iron Painting Intangible Heritage Workshop and the Chu Tieyi Studio; (b) The “China Time-Honored Brand” certification of Chu’s Iron Painting (2024). [Source: Photos by the author at the Chu Tieyi Studio in Anhui Mechanical and Electrical Vocational College, Wuhu, August 8, 2025]

Second, market-oriented studios and cultural and creative enterprises play a major role in promoting innovation in the iron painting market.

In the marketization process of contemporary iron paintings, Chu’s iron painting plays a unique and cautious role. At Master Chu Jinxia’s studio in the Wuhu National Advertising Industry Park, the author conducted an in-depth interview with this national-level inheritor of intangible cultural heritage. When discussing the path toward innovative development of iron paintings, this septuagenarian artisan repeatedly emphasized the non-negotiable importance of “artistry” and “excellence”:

We must not sacrifice the artistic value of iron paintings for marketization, nor produce shoddy work. As a successor to the Chu’s iron painting tradition, I feel it is my mission and responsibility to promote and elevate this art form — producing masterpieces while never compromising the reputation of iron paintings. (Interviewee: Chu Jinxia, National Intangible Cultural Heritage inheritor, August 11, 2025)

During the interview, Chu Jinxia’s tone noticeably intensified when she mentioned “crude and shoddy work” — each petal of the ironwork plum blossom she was carefully shaping had been hammered repeatedly until it reached an almost perfect curve before she would let go. This embodied practice reveals a crucial point: heritage bearers do not passively accept externally imposed meanings but actively contest the authority to define the “authenticity” of iron paintings. While she embraces her state-recognized identity as a “non-material cultural heritage inheritor,” she also draws upon the familial tradition symbolized by her father as a higher source of legitimacy, thereby resisting the erosion of artistic value by purely market-driven logic.

The marketing strategy of Chu’s Iron Painting embodies this concept. As a “China Time-Honored Brand”, no mechanical stamping equipment is deployed in its studio, and all works are forged completely by hand. This conscious avoidance of industrialized production is not only a market positioning, but also a cultural preservation of the “authenticity” of iron painting. While adhering to the high-quality product orientation, Chu’s Iron Painting has also conducted active explorations in innovation: Its new “Welcoming Guest Pine” miniature collectible ornament (Figure 15a) has been successfully selected into the 2025 “Yangtze River Delta Souvenir” list (Dajiang News, 2025); in terms of communication, the younger generation has brought iron painting to the general public through short videos and live streaming, and the monthly sales volume of the “Peaches and Plums Bring Fragrance” iron painting display stand (Figure 15b) for graduation season exceeds 50,000 yuan. The practice of Chu’s Iron Painting shows that “artistic adherence” and “market innovation” are not in binary opposition — that, when grounded in adherence to the “high-quality” bottom line, innovation gains genuine cultural legitimacy (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998).



Figure 15. (a) The “Welcoming Guest Pine” miniature collectible ornament. [Source: *From Wuhu Iron Painting “Welcoming Guest Pine” Miniature Collector’s Edition Is Here!* by Dajiang News, 2025, December 24, WeChat public account (https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/89LtfClw7i5boekz_L5Wog)]. (b) The Pure Handmade Innovative Product “Peaches and Plums Bring Fragrance”. [Source: Photo by the author at the Chu Tiewi Studio in Anhui Mechanical and Electrical Vocational College, Wuhu, August 8, 2025]

In the Feilong iron painting shop in the ancient city of Wuhu, the owner described to the author the alternation of consumer groups:

In the past, most people who bought iron paintings were knowledgeable and fond of art. They bought them and hung them at home as decoration. Now it is different; most of them are tourists from elsewhere, and they buy a small piece as a souvenir. We also need to follow the market; the small, cheap ones sell best. (interviewee: Mr. Gao, the owner of Feilong iron painting shop, August 8, 2025, Wuhu ancient city)

This observation is highly consistent with the author’s field survey: traditional large landscapes are displayed in the corner, and the most prominent position in the center of the shop is a small, price-friendly iron painting of “companion gift” type. Iron painting is experiencing a meaning shift from “artwork” to “cultural goods” - its value is more dependent on the symbolic meaning of “Wuhu specialty”.

However, this transformation is not a one-way passive process. Many iron painting brands actively embrace market changes and leverage their unique cultural resources to provide products or services that meet new market demands. With the assistance of the provincial inheritors of intangible cultural heritage (Ye he, Zhang Decai) and Shangmei Cultural Creativity Company, Feilong iron painting has produced a series of creative cultural products, such as iron painting night lights with Hui-style aesthetics (Figure 16a), Iron Painting Incense Art Works (Figure 16b) meeting people’s needs for contemplation, meditation, and work in private spaces, flower utensils (Figure 17a), vehicle pendants (Figure 17b), and bookmarks, etc., making traditional art spatial, simple and practical. These products have won gold or silver awards at the China Tourism Commodities Competition on multiple occasions (Wuhu Daily, 2023,2026).



Figure 16. (a) The “Hui Rhyme” Iron Painting Night Light by Feilong. [Source: *From I Make Cultural and Creative Products in Wuhu | Iron Painting Cultural Creativity: Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance Gets “Trendy”*, by Wuhu Daily, 2023, August 26, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/8o4oQaUOSilB4zxOKI7pvg>)]. (b) Feilong Iron Painting Incense Art Works. [Source: *From Have You Seen the Iron Painting Souvenir That Can Light Incense?* by Wuhu Daily, 2026, March 2, WeChat public account (https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/r_yJOdnR7kC6f4tt2SvboQ)]



Figure 17. (a) Iron Painting Flower Vase Series Ornaments; (b) Iron Painting Dot-Colored Car Hanging Ornament. [Source: Photos by the author at the Feilong Iron Painting store in Wuhu Ancient Town, August 9, 2025]

Huiyifang Iron Painting focuses on attracting younger consumer groups by accurately capturing contemporary Chinese pop culture trends and social sentiments. Its market-oriented innovations are evident in two key aspects: first, it enhances consumer interaction through an “experiential” on-site forging model; second, it actively engages with pop culture by encouraging consumers to personalize their creations using popular intellectual property (IP). The customizable IP images include “Nezha” (Figure 18a), “Ao Bing” (Figure 18b), “Zzing” (Figure 19a), and “Capybara” (Figure 19b). Among these, “Zzing” is a trending art toy IP that rapidly gained popularity after being signed by Pop Mart in 2024, with a unique visual feature: a group of small stars wearing hoods, rosy-cheeked, golden-skinned, and chubby. With a “curing” and “imperfect” image, it precisely touches young people seeking emotional comfort under pressure. “Capybara,” on the other hand, represents another extreme: absolute relaxation. In 2025, riding on the global success of the Chinese animated film “Ne Zha: The Devil’s Child Descends upon the Sea”, the studio’s Ne Zha and Ao Bing ironworks were featured in the Anhui episode of CCTV-1’s Intangible Heritage China, drawing national attention (Qiren Jiangxin, 2025).



Figure 18. (a) Anime Iron Painting “Nezha”; (b) Anime Iron Painting “Ao Bing”. [Source: From Qiren Jiangxin x Feiwuzhi Wenhua Yichan Tiejia: Wuhu Tiejia Duanduan Jiyi Daibiaoxing Chuanchengren — Dan Weixiang [Qiren Jiangxin x Intangible Cultural Heritage Iron Painting: Representative Inheritor of Wuhu Iron Painting Forging Techniques — Dan Weixiang], by Qiren Jiangxin, 2025, November 20, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/64PMK6amtO4xdD11DFI9Wg>)]

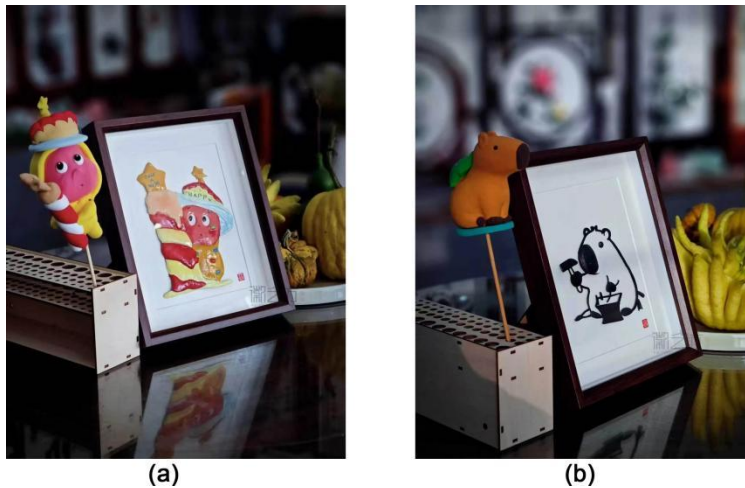


Figure 19. (a) Iron Painting “Zzing” (Star People); (b) Iron Painting “Capybara”. [Source: From Huiyifang Iron Painting (watermark on image)]

Whether it is the “narrative of resistance” embodied in Ne Zha’s defiant declaration, “I am the master of my own destiny,” the “narrative of healing” represented by Zzing’s embrace of imperfection, or the “narrative of relaxation” encapsulated in Capybara’s anti-involution ethos — all serve, in essence, as emotional outlets and vessels of solace that young people seek for themselves in a high-pressure society. These Intellectual Properties are no longer just commodities, but a “mood antidote” and a “trend currency”, carrying young people’s recognition of their own identity, their desire for emotional companionship, and their imagination of a more relaxed lifestyle. Together, these phenomena point to a deeper trend: young people are increasingly constructing their inner worlds through acts of consumption.

It is evident that the significance of iron paintings has begun to shift toward personalization and emotional resonance during their market-oriented transformation — iron paintings are no longer merely gifts or decorative items on display, but have entered private spaces, becoming a medium for self-expression and emotional healing. This shift is vividly reflected in the Feilong Iron Painting store located in Wuhu Ancient City. A series of iron paintings with diverse styles stands in sharp contrast to the traditional landscape and flower-and-bird motifs typically found in the shop. One piece features a cartoon-style girl with her hands in her pockets, with the phrase “The less you care, the smoother things go” engraved above (Figure 20a); another conveys a healing aura through minimalist Zen-inspired strokes, inscribed on its left side with “Believe in yourself, and the world will make way for you” (Figure 20b).



Figure 20. (a) Playful Cartoon-Style Iron Painting; (b) Minimalist Zen-Inspired Iron Painting. [Source: Photos by the author at the Feilong Iron Painting store in Wuhu Ancient Town, August 18, 2025]

As shown in Figure 20a and Figure 20b, these works reflect how iron painting has transcended its traditional functions of decoration or commemoration and is increasingly becoming a medium for consumers’ self-expression of personality, psychology, and behavioral patterns. The author observed that significantly more customers paused to view this series of works than those depicting traditional themes. A young female consumer’s account

was particularly representative:

The first thing I saw was this sentence — “The less you care, the smoother things go.” I recently changed my job and have been feeling anxious every day. When I saw this sentence, my heart suddenly felt relieved. I had seen large iron paintings at my elders’ home when I was young, which were very impressive, but those landscapes and pine trees had nothing to do with me. This one is different. It seems like something I want to say to myself. (Interviewee A, personal communication, August 18, 2025, Feilong Iron Painting Wuhu Ancient City Store)

She bought the painting and planned to hang it above her desk, adding, “Seeing it every day is like someone patting my shoulder and saying, ‘It is okay.’” Another young man who entered the store almost simultaneously stopped for a long time in front of that Minimalist Zen-Inspired Iron Painting:

“I just went through a not-so-successful period of starting a business. These might be motivational words for others, but they were not for me. I need something on my desk to remind me — I am not doing this alone, the iron is cold, but after being pounded, it can take on any shape.” (Interviewee B, personal communication, August 18, 2025, Feilong Iron Painting Wuhu Ancient City Store)

In summary, in response to the government’s policy call for the development of excellent traditional culture, the pressure of market transformation, and the new intrinsic demands of consumers, the significance of Wuhu iron paintings has undergone three layers of reconfiguration: from “artwork” to “cultural commodity” and then to “emotional carrier”. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) once pointed out that the significance of heritage is constantly produced through display and interpretation. The case of iron paintings further indicates that the subject of this significant production has expanded from the inheritors to the market end - from the traditional craftsmanship of “time-honored brands” to the product innovation of cultural and creative companies, and then to consumers’ participation in the creation of significance through purchasing. During this process, the “authenticity” of iron paintings has not disappeared but has been endowed with new connotations through the negotiation among different actors - it no longer takes “whether it looks like a painting” as the evaluation criterion but takes “whether it can generate an emotional connection with me” as the value standard.

Third, cross-boundary collaborations extensively integrate iron-painting symbols into popular culture and digital media.

The Huangmei Opera “Romance of Iron Painting” (Figure 21), which tells the story of Tang Tianchi’s bumpy journey from an unknown blacksmith to a master of iron painting and praises his fearless and determined spirit of struggle, was selected for the 2022 Anhui Provincial Drama Creation Incubation Program. Since 2022, the Iron Painting Association has partnered with iFlytek to launch digital collectibles, minting and selling masterpieces such as *Misty Waves at Tianmen* and *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* on the blockchain, reaching young audiences in digital form (Huanle Wuhu, 2023).



Figure 21. A Scene From the Huangmei Opera “Romance of Iron Painting.” [Source: From Tiegu Huahun, Zai Duan Huazhang [Iron Bones, Painting Soul: Forging a New Chapter], by Huanle Wuhu, 2023, February 25, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/qqPvjDFIXzfKrgkLuiKZoQ>)]

To implement the National Radio and Television Administration’s “Travel with Micro-Short Dramas” creation plan, the first micro-short drama themed on the intangible cultural heritage of iron painting in Wuhu, “The Iron Painting Immortal Master” (Figure 22), was produced by the Cultural, Tourism and Sports Bureau of Jinghu District. It employs a fantastical narrative to address the serious subject of intangible cultural heritage inheritance, telling the story of a father and daughter from an iron painting family who, amid differing artistic philosophies, explore the balance between preserving tradition and pursuing innovation, thereby facilitating the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage and Wuhu’s local culture. It was launched at the Douyin After-Dinner Theater in 2025 and has garnered nearly 5 million views (Huanle Wuhu, 2025).



Figure 22. Promotional Poster for the Micro-Short Drama “Hua Tie Xian Shi”. (The Iron Painting Immortal Master). [Source: From *Jinghu duanju ren!* “Hua Tie Xian Shi” shangxian! Kuai kaiqi zhuiju moshi → | *Chunyou jianghuai* [Jinghu short drama creators! “The Iron Painting Immortal Master” is online! Start binge-watching now → | Spring tour in Jianghuai], by Huanle Wuhu, 2025, March 13, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/zOLYrF4eiuA9vBUfOQ4Whg>)]

Three production areas exist without contradiction: the transmission system serves as the “root” and “soul”; market mechanisms promote the “utility” and “circulation”; and cross-boundary innovations investigate the “change” and “integration.” This distinction and connection not only limit Wuhu iron painting to the tradition of the 50s-70s but also enable its active exploration of innovative development and creative transformation. In the process of continuous re-creation and reproduction of tradition, Wuhu iron painting has not only maintained its own cultural foundation but also gained the vitality and power of modern life.

The Multiplied Circulation Network

1. As Tourist Souvenirs and E-commerce Commodities

In important tourist sites such as Wuhu Ancient City, Jiuzi Ancient Town, and Xiaojinhua “Iron Painting Sales Street”, visitors purchase small iron paintings and bookmarks as souvenirs. Besides, on online shopping platforms such as Taobao, Douyin, and WeChat, products from Chu’s Iron Painting, Feilong Iron Painting, and Huiyi Workshop are sold nationwide as art goods. Both sales channels supply iron paintings to the public, satisfying their individual aesthetic preferences, commemorative needs, or gift-giving needs.

2. As Urban Public Relations Gifts

Iron painting is reinforced as a “city card.” In 1990, the ten-thousand-piece porcelain-plate iron painting Panda Panpan was produced for the Asian Games; in 1993, the gold-plated iron painting Welcoming Guest Pine was presented as a national gift to an International Olympic Committee official (Wang, 2017). In addition, iron paintings have been used as official gifts for the Yangtze River Delta Summit and as trophies for economic figures (Figure 23) (Huiyifang Tiehua, 2021). Such circulation conveys local cultural strength and reinforces the function of political symbolism.



Figure 23. 2020 Wuhu Top Ten Economic Figures Iron Painting Trophies by Huiyifang. [Source: From Huiyifang Iron Painting (watermark on image)]

3. Cultural Landmarks in Public Spaces

Iron painting is significant in modifying the urban appearance of Wuhu. The city has hung iron paintings in several public areas, including the Ancient City, Jiuzi Ancient Town, Wuxuan Airport, high-speed rail VIP lounges, museums, and parks. For instance, the large-scale open-air iron painting “The Prosperity of Hui Merchants Across the Land Began in Jiuzi” (Figure 24) was created by Chu’s Iron Painting for Jiuzi Ancient Town in 2017 (Huanle Wuhu, 2023). To celebrate its 50th anniversary, Jinghu Primary School collaborated with Huiyi Workshop to create decorative murals of the “Ten Scenes of Wuhu” for the school’s cultural walls in 2016 (Huiyifang Tiehua, 2016). These works transform iron painting from a stationary display into a method of describing the environment.



Figure 24. “The Prosperity of Hui Merchants Across the Land Began in Jiuzi”. [Source: *From Tiegu Huahun, Zai Duan Huazhang* [Iron Bones, Painting Soul: Forging a New Chapter], by Huanle Wuhu, 2023, February 25, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/qqPvjDFIXzfKrgkLuiKZoQ>)]

4. As a Cross-Regional Artistic Medium

Other cities have appropriate iron painting as a symbol of self-expression. In 2021, the Shenzhen Municipal Government commissioned national-level inheritor Chu Jinxia to create “Vientiane of the Greater Bay Area” (Figure 25) for the 40th anniversary of the Special Economic Zone’s reform and opening-up (Shenzhen Jiguan Shiwu, 2021). The work comprehensively showcases the landmark architecture of Shenzhen’s urban development, serving the narrative of the Special Economic Zone’s achievements over 40 years of reform and opening. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, the curator in Shanghai’s Changning District invited four renowned artists of the Shanghai School to create artworks inspired by the red landmarks and historical narratives of Yuyuan Road in 2021. In collaboration with Wuhu Iron Painting, they hand-forged four pieces of public iron art, one of which is “The Editorial Office of ‘The Bolshevik’” (Figure 26) (Shanghai Hongqiao Contemporary Art Museum, 2021). This artwork is displayed at the entrance to Hengchang Lane, the former site of the editorial office, reflecting the pursuits of the generation of Communist Party members who dedicated themselves to the Party’s propaganda work during that darkest era. This collaboration between art and intangible cultural heritage has enabled Wuhu iron painting to enter Shanghai and narrate red revolutionary stories, thereby re-shaping the cultural image of century-old Yuyuan Road.



Figure 25. The iron painting “Vientiane of the Greater Bay Area”. [Source: From *Qixiang Pangbo! Anhui Chu shi tiehua xinzuo “Wanqu Wanxiang” zai Shenzhen huitang jiepai* [Magnificent! New iron painting “Vientiane of the Greater Bay Area” by Anhui Chu’s iron painting unveiled at Shenzhen Hall], by Shenzhen Jiguan Shiwu, 2021, May 12, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/D1-kJhfYuBNIFzCgYPFsmw>)]



Figure 26. Iron Painting Public Artwork “The Editorial Office of The Bolshevik”. [Source: From “*Jianjing*” — Qingzhu Zhongguo Gongchandang chengli 100 zhounian ji “Bainian Yuyuan Lu” Changsanjiao xin gangbihua zuopin zhan kaimu [“Tenacity” — Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China and the “Centennial Yuyuan Road” Yangtze River Delta new pen drawing exhibition opens], by Shanghai Hongqiao Contemporary Art Museum, 2021, September 29, WeChat public account (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/iikxISrrIcJ7voQKPufZXQ>)]

5. As Corporate Customized Products

Wuhu Iron painting serves brand empowerment. Chery Automobile in Wuhu, Anhui, started from a “small shack” workshop in 1997 and rose to become a Fortune Global 500 company in 2024, achieving remarkable results that exemplify its pioneering spirit (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). The “small shack” spirit has since become the core ethos of its corporate culture. In its brand marketing and communication, Chery has actively partnered with Wuhu iron painting as an artistic medium, using the craft’s connotations of repeated hammering and unyielding strength to express the corporate values of “daring to be first,” “perseverance through hardship,” and “indomitable spirit.” Chery has collaborated extensively with Chu’s Iron Painting and Huiyifang Iron Painting to launch iron-painting souvenirs featuring the “small shack” motif, as well as promotional gifts depicting new Chery vehicle models. Thus, Iron painting becomes a visual totem of corporate spirit and brand image (Figure 27).



(a)

(b)

Figure 27. Chery Corporate Gifts Customized by Huiyifang Workshop. [Source: From Huiyifang Iron Painting (watermark on image)]

6. As Museum or Exhibition Artworks

Wuhu iron paintings have maintained their authoritative discourse within the professional art circle through high-level exhibitions both at home and abroad. While showcasing the cultural charm of Anhui, they also actively shape China's image and identity. For instance, the "Contemporary Wuhu Iron Painting Masterpieces Exhibition" has been held in over 10 cities, including Wuhan, Shanghai and Hangzhou, with support from the "Special Fund for Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism" (Huanle Wuhu, 2024). In October 2021, the Eighth China International Copyright Expo was held in Hangzhou, where 85 iron paintings from Wuhu were on display. These works are divided into four parts: red culture, Anhui architecture, Rural Revitalization, and iron calligraphy (Chen, 2021). For instance, the red ironwork piece titled "The Iron-built Country" (Figure 28) conveys a wish for the prosperity and strength of the motherland through the selection of symbolic cultural elements such as the Great Wall, the Five-Star Red Flag, and the welcoming pine tree. The iron painting "Wanfeng Huiyun" (Anhui Rhyme) (Figure 29), which depicts Hui-style architecture, employs the "architectural black" and "flowing white" techniques of the Xin'an school of painting to convey an ethereal, grand quality. The reproduction and recoding of iron painting art comprehensively present contemporary Chinese tradition and modernity, the spirit of the times, social outlook, and local cultural characteristics.



Figure 28. "The Iron-built Country". [Source: From Gujiangye "Tieda de Jiangshan" tiehua jingyan di ba jie Zhongguo guoji banquan boli hui [Gujiangye's iron painting "The Iron-built Country" stuns at the 8th China International Copyright Expo], by Dongfang Huihuang Wenchuang, 2021, October 25, WeChat public account (https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/_lkHs7rh3q5j-wbvBWmmSg)]



Figure 29. The iron painting "Wanfeng Huiyun" (Anhui Rhyme). [Source: From Wuhu tiehua liangxiang di ba jie Zhongguo guoji banquan boli hui [Wuhu iron painting appears at the 8th China International Copyright Expo], by Chen Feng, 2021, October 19, China News Service Anhui (<http://www.ah.chinanews.com.cn/news/2021/1019/290461.shtml>)]

Consumption and the Contested Production of Meaning

The Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance community is committed to preserving the purity and "authenticity" of iron-painting skills. Different iron painting enterprises and workshops rely on their respective resource advantages to establish distinct market positions. For example, Chu's iron paintings adhere to the ethos of the iron-painting art boutique and guard against excessive commercialization. Feilong iron painting fully leverages its creative advantages, implements a market-oriented strategy, and meets consumers' demand for personalized, living iron painting products. Huiyifang workshop follows popular culture trends, integrates iron painting with popular cultural elements, co-creates products with consumers, and enhances their experience. For

the local government, iron painting has become an important cultural asset for enhancing the city's image. Local enterprises use iron painting to enhance their brand image. For consumers, iron painting has three meanings and values. First, it can be used as a souvenir for tourists, carrying consumers' personal memories and imagination of the urban landscape. Secondly, it can be used as a personalized gift for colleagues, superiors, lovers, and teachers, whose value lies in maintaining social relations. Finally, it can also be used as a personal display in a private environment, allowing consumers to express themselves, stimulate themselves, and find emotional comfort. Therefore, the final cultural significance and value of Wuhu iron painting are dynamically constructed through the continuous interaction, consultation, and communication among the Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance groups, local governments, local enterprises, and consumers.

To sum up, our observations since reform and opening-up show that the "invention of tradition" is not a process that can be achieved overnight but rather an ongoing one. Different groups created their own versions of "authentic" iron paintings: the government focused on protecting iron paintings and cultivating national identity; market-oriented enterprises focus on innovation to attract customers; And consumers create another form of iron painting through the choice when buying iron paintings, or to express their identity, or to seek emotional sustenance. Sometimes, these different versions of iron paintings may not be the same, but it is this coexistence that keeps this art form alive.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the social life history of Wuhu iron painting over approximately 340 years. From the Kangxi reign of the Qing dynasty to 1949, iron painting remained a niche art form, with its primary purchasers being literati, scholar-officials, and government officials. For them, the art of iron painting symbolized personal taste and the social identity of the scholar-official class. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the government took control over the production and circulation of Wuhu iron painting, transforming it into a symbol of collectivism and the socialist state. During this period, Wuhu iron painting served ideological education and the shaping of a socialist national identity. Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, Wuhu iron painting has entered a new phase. The meanings of production, circulation, and consumption have undergone profound differentiation, with their value and significance co-constructed through negotiation among multiple actors, including the government, intangible cultural heritage inheritors, iron painting brands, and consumers. Wuhu Iron painting maintains a dynamic balance and development amid the tensions between its multiple identities as "artwork," "cultural commodity," and "medium for expressing identity and emotion." Furthermore, the tradition of Wuhu iron painting has been continuously invented and reinvented throughout its social life history.

This study enriched two important theories. First, it expanded the theory of "social life of things" (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986), pointing out that the history of things may not be a one-way evolution from goods to unique things and then back to goods. Taking Wuhu iron painting as an example, multiple identities, meanings and forms coexist: the same handicraft can be regarded as a traditional intangible cultural heritage by the government, as a representative of some authentic skills by the inheritance group, as a cultural landmark and city image logo by the local government, as a promotion tool for brand marketing by enterprises, as a tourist souvenir by consumers, or as a private gift for maintaining social relations or a personalized media for self-expression. Second, this study revised the "invention of tradition" model (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). We have observed that the revival of the tradition of "iron painting" is not a single event or a one-off practice, but a long, continuous, and controversial dynamic process of recreation and reproduction. The goal is to serve the rationality and legitimacy of the state and the government, as well as the needs of the political, economic, and cultural development of current society. Therefore, this study proposes the "re-invention of tradition".

These findings reveal a different perspective from the current standard approach to the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. Usually, traditional art is either preserved in museums or solidified into unchangeable cultural heritage. However, Wuhu iron painting can express diverse ideas according to the purposes of different participants — protection, profit, promotion, and self-expression. The interaction between these participants is not always positive. However, it is this kind of consultation, competition, and game that helps maintain the vitality and sustainable development of Wuhu iron painting in contemporary society.

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