

The Digitization, Preservation, and Research of the Intangible Cultural Heritage along the Ancient Postal Roads in the Nan Yue (South Guangdong) region

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Abstract

This study examines the research status of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources along the ancient postal roads in Southern Guangdong from the perspective of domestic academic history. It reveals scholars' explorations and practices in this field from different angles and levels, resulting in a wealth of research outcomes and experiences. The research is divided into three phases: employing literature analysis to classify and organize ICH resources, conducting on-site investigations to establish a digitized website database for enhanced organization and utilization, and utilizing quantitative research methods to enhance the activation and utilization of resources. The findings of this study hold significant academic and practical significance, as they deepen our understanding of ICH resources along the ancient postal roads in Southern Guangdong and promote their digitization, preservation, and research.

Keywords: Ancient Postal Roads in Nan Yue (South Guangdong) region/Guangdong Province through South China Historical trail; Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH); Digitization; Heritage Preservation; Heritage Conservation; Cultural and Creative Industries

Introduction

The South Guangdong Ancient Roads, also known as the historical trails crossing South Guangdong, bear a profound historical and rich cultural significance. It originates in Guangzhou and traverses through Huizhou, Meizhou, Chaozhou, Qingyuan, Shaoguan, and other areas, connecting the entire Guangdong Province (Guangdong, 2018). As a link between history and culture, this ancient network embodies the historical memory and cultural heritage of the Guangdong region, making it an important component of global cultural diversity. However, with the evolution of time



and the development of modern transportation, the intangible cultural heritage resources embedded in these ancient roads are facing an increasingly severe threat of depletion and gradual disappearance.

Fortunately, the widespread application of digital technology in the field of cultural preservation has provided new avenues for safeguarding, organizing, and researching intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources along the ancient roads. Leveraging digital technology enables us to efficiently record, preserve, and disseminate the rich connotations of these ICH resources, facilitating convenient access for future research and understanding (Liu Yanlan, 2019). Moreover, digital organization also facilitates the organization and management of numerous dispersed ICH resources, promoting their interconnectedness and facilitating interdisciplinary research.

The aim of this paper is to delve into the digital organization, preservation, and research of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources in the northern part of the ancient roads in South Guangdong, and to leverage modern information technology to achieve the protection and inheritance of this significant cultural heritage (Wang Wenzhang, 2010). Firstly, through academic literature and documents, we will understand the characteristics and value of ICH resources along the ancient roads in South Guangdong, delving into their cultural connotations and historical memories. Subsequently, we will explore the methods and techniques of digital organization for recording, preserving, and disseminating ICH resources through quantitative research (Guangdong Provincial Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, 2017). Finally, we will discuss the opportunities and challenges brought about by digital organization and explore how to better utilize digital resources to promote the protection and cultural inheritance of ICH resources (Wang Lisha, 2017, and Wang Pingshan, 2014). We also hope that this research will raise awareness and foster collective efforts towards the revitalization of intangible cultural heritage, making greater contributions to the preservation of China's diverse and abundant intangible cultural heritage.

Research Objectives

The research aims to digitally organize, preserve, and study the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources along the Ancient Roads in South China, particularly focusing on the northern segment in Guangdong Province. The main objectives are as follows:

1. Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the types, characteristics, and value of the ICH resources along the Ancient Roads in South China. Through literature



analysis, a holistic and systematic understanding of these resources will be established.

2. Establish a systematic, scientific, and standardized data collection, organization, and analysis network platform through on-site investigations to enhance the digital organization and effective utilization of the ICH resources along the Ancient Roads in South China.

3. Engage in participatory exploration and practice by analyzing and extracting various data from the northern segment of the Ancient Roads. Summarize and promote the activation and utilization of ICH resources along the Ancient Roads in South China.

By achieving these research objectives, we aim to provide theoretical guidance and practical experience for the digital preservation and inheritance of the ICH resources along the Ancient Roads in South China, thereby promoting the sustained development and transmission of intangible cultural heritage in this region. Additionally, we hope that through this research, a deeper understanding of China's rich and diverse intangible cultural heritage will be fostered, contributing positively to the protection and inheritance of these valuable cultural assets.

Literature Review

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is an important component of ethnic culture, serving as the material carrier of ethnic cultural inheritance and a crucial cultural representation in affirming the distinctive characteristics and building ethnic identity. In foreign countries, such as South Korea and Japan, ICH is regarded as "intangible cultural assets," and they have conducted commendable efforts in its documentation and research (Kang Baocheng, 2013, 2010). For instance, the Japanese folk art scholar Yanagi Soetsu's works, including "The Philosophy of Folk Crafts," "Forty Years of Folk Crafts," and "The Purpose of Establishing the Japanese Folk Crafts Museum," have actively promoted the inheritance and development of Japan's intangible cultural heritage and traditional craftsmanship (Shi Yingping, 2002).

Chinese scholars have conducted classification and organization of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources along the ancient roads in South Guangdong. The study titled "A Literature Review of Research on the Ancient Roads in South Guangdong" (Zhang Heqing, 2021) primarily encompasses categories such as ancient road remains, historical cultural towns and villages, cultural relics, and intangible cultural heritage (Xu Huapeng, 2005). These efforts hold significant value in promoting the dissemination of excellent Lingnan culture, fostering regional coordinated development, and enhancing Guangdong Province's cultural soft power (Xu Ruisheng, 2016). Moreover, research has been conducted from various perspectives, such as



"cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2003), "heritage preservation" (He Xuejun, 2005), and "cultural heritage protection" (Shan Jixiang, 2006). These studies provide a theoretical basis and value assessment for the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient roads in South Guangdong.

2 Scholars have utilized GIS technology to carry out spatial data collection, organization, and analysis of the ancient roads in South Guangdong, Guangdong Province (Peng Dongmei, 2006 and Wan Fei, 2021). Combining on-site investigations, they systematically organized and evaluated aspects such as spatial structure, route layout, and node distribution, proposing corresponding plans for digital organization and utilization. The research titled "Digital Reproduction of Cultural Promotion along the Ancient Roads in South Guangdong" (Liu Yanlan, 2019) provides technical support and methodological guidance for the digital organization and utilization of intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient roads in South Guangdong.

3 In 2017, the Guangdong Provincial Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, along with other relevant departments, released the "General Plan for the Protection and Utilization of the Ancient Roads in South Guangdong, Guangdong Province." This plan provides comprehensive arrangements for the development objectives, spatial structure, route layout, supporting facilities, functional guidance, and implementation mechanisms of the ancient roads in South Guangdong. It also analyzes and forecasts the issues and challenges within the plan. This initiative aligns with the national "Belt and Road" initiative and implements the "Healthy China 2030" outline and the strategic requirement to build Guangdong Province as a cultural powerhouse, thus enhancing the cultural "soft power" of Guangdong Province. These research efforts offer a planning framework and practical case studies for the revitalization of intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient roads in South Guangdong.

In conclusion, the activation of intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient roads in South Guangdong holds significant importance and value for research. Domestic scholars have made certain achievements and progress in this field; however, there are still some shortcomings and issues that need to be addressed. These include expanding the scope of research, elevating research standards, innovating research methods, and broadening the research perspective. Only through such efforts can this research drive rural revitalization and international recognition, while also stimulating social value.



Conceptual Framework

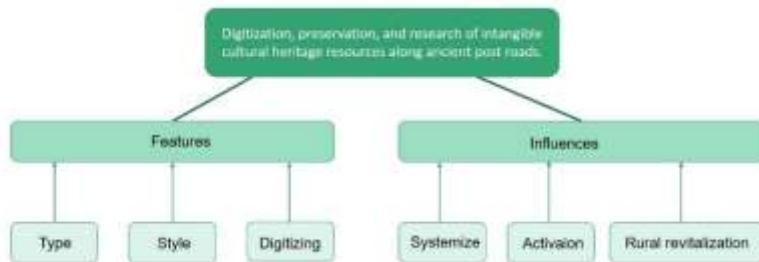


Fig. 1 Conceptual Framework

This framework is established based on specific cultural and social contexts, reflecting the local cultural values. By integrating the digital organization and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage resources along the Ancient Postal Roads with local economic development and rural revitalization strategies, we aim to explore the significance and roles of these resources in different fields more effectively. Through this conceptual framework, it will provide valuable references and guidance for the protection and inheritance of this precious cultural heritage.

Research Methodology

This study employs literature review, on-site investigation, and quantitative research methods.

1 This study reviewed and compiled classic literature, works, and related materials on the digitization and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage both domestically and internationally. Data retrieval was conducted from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and other relevant academic websites to search for research materials related to "Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads (including ancient postal roads)" from 1974 to 2023. The findings revealed limited systematic descriptions, planning proposals, and organized data related to Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads in publicly available materials, with most presentations in the form of journals and news reports. Within the 27-year period, there were a total of 355 articles on Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads, with less than 10 relevant documents identified from 1974 to 1995. The research on Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads exhibited fluctuations from 1996 to 2023, with the highest increase observed in 2019. Among the identified articles, there were no foreign language publications, and all articles were in Chinese. They were distributed across various publication types, including 135 academic journals, 24 theses, 12 conference papers, 10 newspaper articles, 155 yearbooks, and 2 academic collections, as shown in Table 1.



Research Materials	Years	Data Quantity
Periodicals, featured journals, doctoral dissertations, master's thesis, international conferences, patents, newspapers, achievements, yearbooks, academic series	2023	16
	2022	39
	2021	71
	2020	70
	2019	92
	2018	44
	2017	20
	2016	8
	2007	1
	1996	1
	1974-1995	10

Table 1 Statistics of Research Materials on "Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads" (including ancient postal roads) from 1974 to 2023

Through the analysis of literature, it was observed that relevant articles and reports on Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads began to appear after a gap of 27 years, starting from 1996. This occurrence is closely related to the joint efforts of the Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of Guangdong Province and the Department of Culture of Guangdong Province in compiling the "Guidelines for the Protection and Restoration of Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads," in accordance with the work deployment of the Guangdong provincial government, to further advance the protection and utilization of the Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads. As a result, the intangible cultural heritage resources along the Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads have re-emerged into people's attention and gained more focus. This also provides the research with valuable literature references.

2 This study conducted in-depth investigations and research in the northern Guangdong region along the Ancient Postal Roads. Utilizing various digital technologies and methods, including field surveys, in-depth interviews, oral history, and others, comprehensive and detailed first-hand information was recorded and collected.

3 A quantitative research approach was employed to conduct a survey and evaluation of the intangible cultural heritage resources along the Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads in the northern Guangdong region, specifically focusing on the Nanxiong Meiguan Ancient Road. Based on a comprehensive assessment of factors such as economic foundation and cultural resources, a quantitative analysis was performed to evaluate the basic conditions. According to the total score of the evaluation of the surrounding resources of the intangible cultural heritage along the Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads, they were classified into five levels, ranging from high to low: Level 5, with a score range ≥ 90 points, represents the highest level of intangible cultural heritage resources in the vicinity.



Resources with scores ranging from 75 to 89 points are classified as Level 4 intangible cultural heritage resources.

Resources with scores ranging from 60 to 74 points are classified as Level 3 intangible cultural heritage resources.

Resources with scores ranging from 45 to 59 points are classified as Level 2 intangible cultural heritage resources.

Resources with scores ranging from 30 to 44 points are classified as Level 1 intangible cultural heritage resources.

Resources with scores of ≤ 29 points are classified as non-classified intangible cultural heritage resources.

Furthermore, the classification of the resources into different levels corresponds to the following designations:

Level 5 intangible cultural heritage resources are designated as "Special Grade Cultural Heritage Resources."

Level 4 and Level 3 intangible cultural heritage resources are designated as "Excellent Grade Cultural Heritage Resources."

Level 2 and Level 1 intangible cultural heritage resources are designated as "Ordinary Grade Cultural Heritage Resources."

Resource unit name	Evaluation Items								Total score	Grade		
	Resource element evaluation				Resource influence		Resource availability					
	Ornamental value	Historical, cultural and artistic value	Peculiarity	Integrity	Reputation	Reputation	Inheritance	Development conditions				
Incense Dragon	15	14	8	7	8	8	7	8	75	4		
Memorial Park	10	12	7	7	6	7	8	7	64	3		
Revolutionary site	9	11	7	7	7	7	8	6	62	3		
Office site	10	10	7	7	6	7	8	6	61	3		
Forest Park	12	8	6	8	5	7	7	7	60	3		
Towers	10	9	7	7	6	6	6	6	57	2		



Ancient ginkgo tree	9	5	6	8	5	6	5	6	53	2
Ancient village 1	11	7	6	7	4	6	5	5	52	2
Ecological Park	9	6	5	8	4	5	7	6	50	2
Baishun Old House	11	6	6	7	3	6	5	6	50	2
Ancient Village 2	9	7	6	6	3	6	4	6	47	2
Ancient Village 3	10	6	6	6	4	4	5	5	46	2
Fishing village	10	6	5	6	3	6	4	6	46	2
Sambo	5	3	4	7	5	6	8	7	45	2
Goose	5	2	2	6	5	7	7	6	40	1
Duck	4	2	2	6	4	7	7	6	38	1
Cigarette	2	2	3	7	5	5	8	5	37	1
Fish	3	2	2	6	4	6	7	6	36	1
Tofu	2	2	1	6	5	7	7	6	36	1
Ciba	4	2	3	6	4	5	7	5	36	1
Green plum wine	3	2	3	6	5	5	7	5	36	1
Ginkgo	4	1	3	6	4	5	8	4	35	1
Cake	3	2	3	6	4	4	7	5	34	1
Beef Jerky	2	1	2	6	4	4	7	5	31	1
Mushroom	3	1	2	6	4	4	7	4	31	1

Table 2 Quantitative Evaluation Table of Intangible Cultural Heritage Peripheral Resources of Nanxiong Meiguan Ancient Road.

Through the evaluation of the cultural heritage resources of the Nanxiong Meiguan Ancient Road, the survey results indicate that the overall cultural heritage resources of the Nanxiong Meiguan Ancient Road are abundant, making it one of the best-preserved ancient postal roads in the country at present.



Research Results

1 Through in-depth literature analysis, we were able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural heritage of the Nan Yue Ancient Postal Roads, which embodies unique historical and traditional values. This deepened our understanding of social development and evolution. The presentation of these historical and traditional values provides significant theoretical foundations for academic research on the intangible cultural heritage resources of the ancient postal roads.

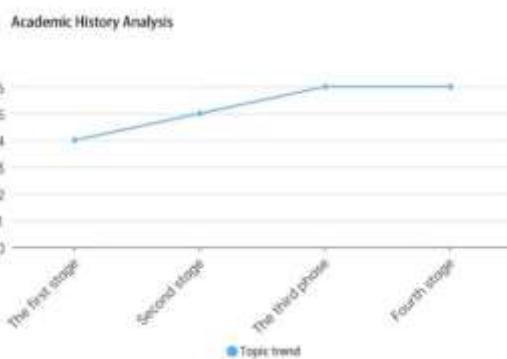


Fig. 2 Trend Analysis of Academic History

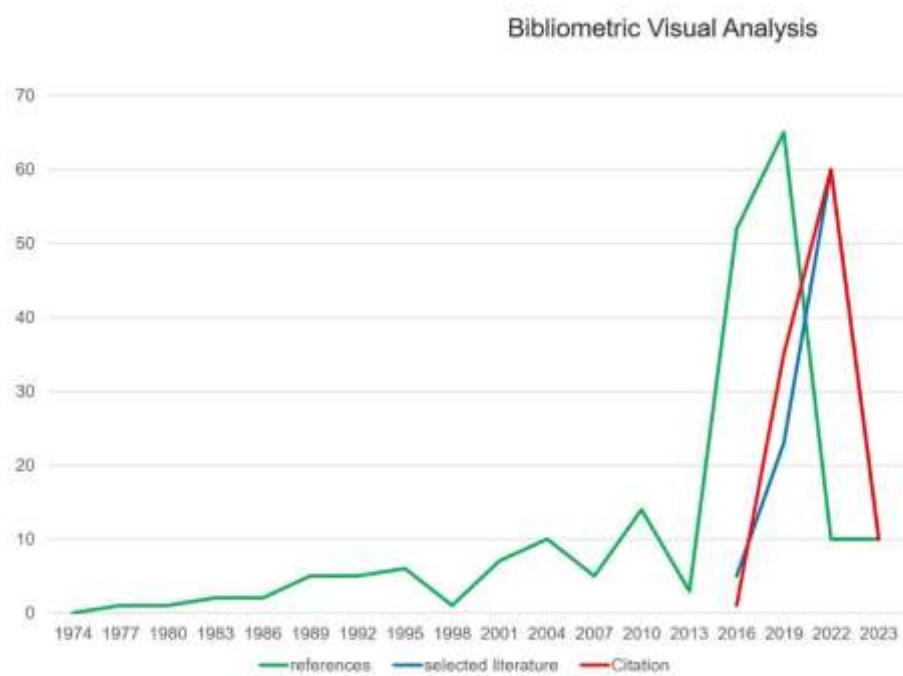


Fig. 3 Quantitative Visualization Analysis Chart



Fig. 4 Distribution of Resource Types

Distribution of disciplines

unit: %

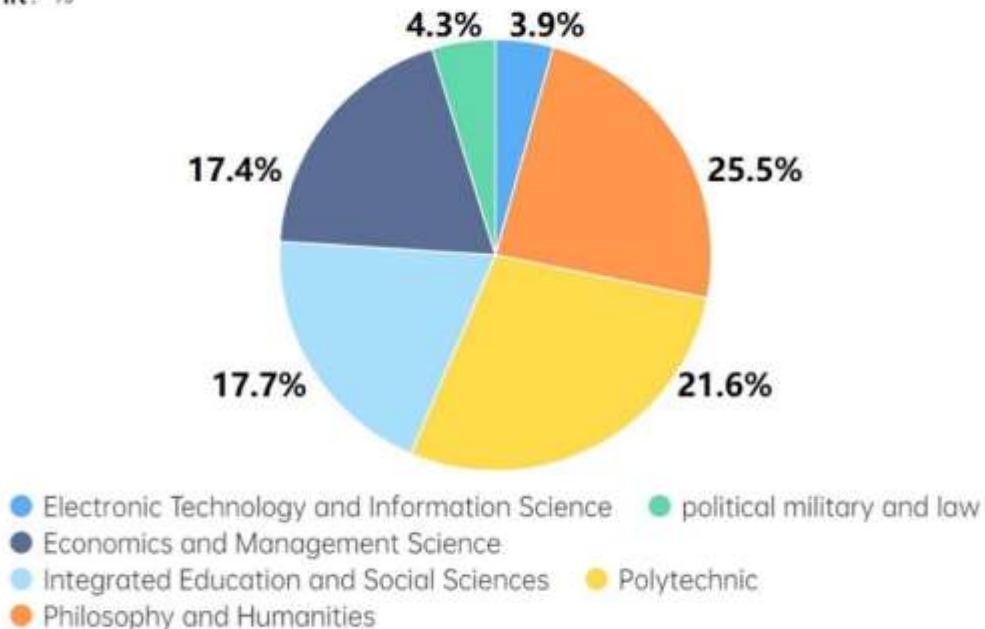


Fig. 5 Distribution of Disciplines

Source distribution

unit: %

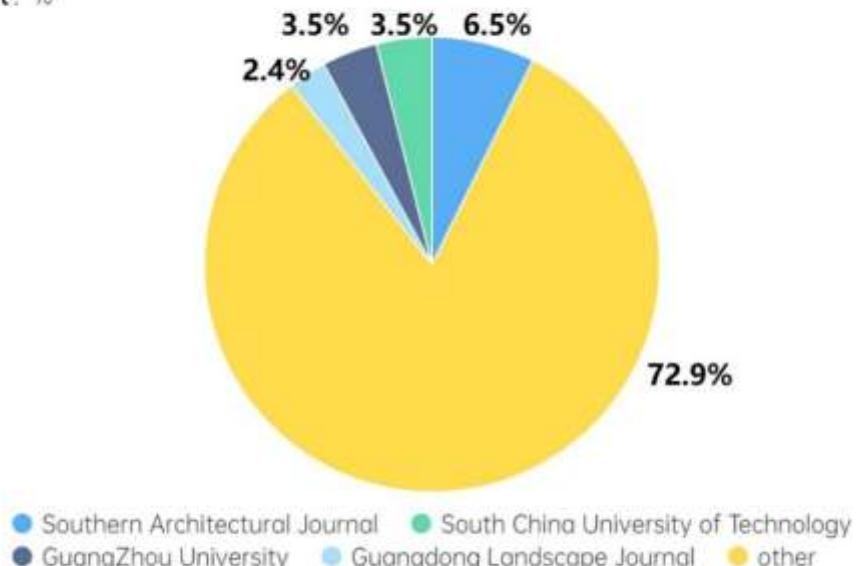


Fig. 6 Distribution of Sources



2 Through on-site investigation and research, we have discovered that the intangible cultural heritage resources of the ancient postal roads hold significant aesthetic value. The artistic creations encompassed within these resources, such as architecture, sculpture, painting, and music, not only showcase human creativity and artistic achievements but also provide people with aesthetic enjoyment and emotional experiences, thereby strengthening social identity and a sense of belonging. In consideration of the distinctive features of the intangible cultural heritage resources along the northern segment of the South China Ancient Road in Guangdong Province, we have undertaken appropriate cultural and creative product design for tourism and established a digital network platform to facilitate online purchases of outstanding cultural and creative designs, contributing to local economic development and rural revitalization. These endeavors hold substantial importance in constructing individual and social identity. Through these efforts, we offer novel approaches and directions for the preservation, inheritance, and utilization of the intangible cultural heritage resources of the ancient postal roads, while also contributing to the ongoing development and cultural prosperity of society.

<http://8.129.183.170:8080/gdjs-ygafy/index.html>





Fig. 7 website screenshot

3 Through quantitative research, intangible cultural heritage resources exhibit economic value. Their preservation and inheritance require substantial resources and funding, which can be facilitated through the cultural and creative industries to boost local tourism, create employment opportunities, and generate economic income. Simultaneously, cultural heritage holds significant educational and research value. Through studying the intangible cultural heritage resources of the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong, we can gain profound insights into the evolution and mutual influence of diverse cultures, fostering cross-cultural exchange and understanding.

In conclusion, the non-material cultural heritage of the ancient post roads possesses subjectivity and societal relevance. A comprehensive interpretation of the value theory of cultural heritage requires a holistic consideration of the aforementioned aspects, in conjunction with specific cultural backgrounds and social contexts for in-depth analysis and research. Through scholarly research on the non-material cultural heritage of the ancient post roads in Southern Guangdong, we have identified and optimized its historical, traditional, aesthetic, and economic values, thereby providing essential insights and guidance for the preservation and inheritance of this precious cultural heritage.



Discussion

Along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong, particularly the Nanxiong Meiguan section, we can discover numerous treasures shining with the radiance of intangible cultural heritage. However, these valuable heritages often face threats and the risk of being forgotten. In the rapidly developing digital era, the digitization, preservation, and research of intangible cultural heritage have become crucial tasks.

A prevailing perspective is that the focus of organizing the intangible cultural heritage along the ancient postal roads should be on tangible objects as they possess tangible historical value. Intangible cultural heritage comprises intangible cultural assets closely linked to people's lives and traditional practices. These traditional skills, oral traditions, and festive activities carry unique historical, value, and social significance.

Furthermore, the rapid advancement of digital technology provides new possibilities for the protection and research of intangible cultural heritage along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong. Through various digital media applications, intangible cultural heritage resources can be presented in more tangible and interactive forms, allowing more people to perceive and experience these unique cultural traditions up close. Additionally, digital organization and management enable convenient categorization, retrieval, and dissemination, promoting global exchange and cooperation of intangible cultural heritage.

Utilizing the cultural and creative industries to drive the revitalization of intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong can offer multi-dimensional value and provide concrete practical strategies and approaches for preservation and inheritance. This will attract greater attention and recognition from the international academic community.

Conclusion

This paper categorizes and classifies the main researchers, countries, institutions, research directions, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources, and achievements in the field of preservation of intangible cultural heritage along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong through literature analysis and on-site investigations. Combined with quantitative research, a survey and evaluation were conducted on the Nanxiong Meiguan section of the ancient postal roads, classifying the ICH resources. The results reveal that the South Guangdong ancient postal roads possess abundant intangible cultural heritage resources, attracting extensive attention from the academic community due to their cultural value and potential. The rapid development of digital technology offers new



possibilities for the preservation and research of intangible cultural heritage along the ancient postal roads.

The findings of this study will not only provide references and insights for the preservation and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage along the South Guangdong ancient postal roads but also offer valuable experiences and inspirations for similar research and practices on a global scale. We believe that the outcomes of this research will make a positive contribution to the digitization of intangible cultural heritage and the development of cultural and creative industries. Ultimately, we hope to raise public awareness and attention towards the intangible cultural heritage along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong, thereby promoting rural revitalization efforts.

Scholars' attention, concern, and innovative contributions to the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong are commendable. However, this paper also identifies certain limitations and issues in domestic research. Future studies should explore and expand in-depth aspects such as broadening the research scope, enhancing research standards, exploring innovative methodologies, and expanding research perspectives. These endeavors will provide new insights and directions for the digitization, preservation, and research of the intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong.

Furthermore, the digitization, preservation, and research of the intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong can be advanced through international cooperation and academic platforms, which is one of the emerging trends in current domestic research. Such exchange activities signify a new phase of "academic refinement and conceptual enhancement" in the work related to the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong, demonstrating its alignment with international concepts and pathways for heritage route activation. These studies offer an international perspective and academic platform for the preservation and utilization of the intangible cultural heritage resources along the ancient postal roads in South Guangdong.



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