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Artistic Characteristics of Chashan Clay Sculpture in Dongguan

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Abstract

Chashan handmade clay sculpture in Dongguan represents a significant tradition within the Lingnan folk art system, encompassing Chashan figurines and silk-clad lantern figurines with over seven hundred years of history. Despite its cultural significance, systematic art-historical analysis of its artistic characteristics remains limited. Drawing on Sculpture Design Theory, Cultural Symbolism Theory, and National Identity Theory, this study examines the design, regional, and cultural characteristics of Chashan clay sculpture. The findings reveal a distinctive regional artistic paradigm in which stylized modeling, high-contrast chromatics, dense decorative grammar, and composite craft techniques are shaped by Pearl River Delta environmental conditions, the Lantern Lighting ceremony, and Lingnan symbolic traditions. The study contributes an integrated analytical framework for the study of regional clay sculpture and offers practical insights for the living transmission of Dongguan intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords

Dongguan Clay Sculpture; Artistic Characteristics; Cultural Symbolism; National Identity; Lingnan Folk Art

1. Introduction

Traditional handicrafts across China face mounting pressures from urbanization, industrialized production, and the transformation of everyday aesthetic life. Folk clay sculpture, one of China's oldest vernacular plastic arts, occupies a paradoxical position: it is simultaneously subject to intensified institutional protection under the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) system and increasingly remote from the ritual and social contexts in which its meaning was originally grounded. How to understand, preserve, and creatively transform such traditions without reducing them to static museum artifacts or superficial commodities constitutes a central challenge for contemporary heritage scholarship.

Chashan handmade clay sculpture in Dongguan, Guangdong Province, is a particularly significant case within this broader problematic. Located within the

Lingnan cultural sphere and the Pearl River Delta, the Chashan tradition has developed over more than seven centuries under the combined influence of local religious institutions, seasonal folk customs, family-based craft networks, and, more recently, urban cultural consumption and ICH governance. The tradition encompasses two formally distinct yet related types: Chashan figurines, fully clay-modeled polychrome sculptures, and silk-clad lantern figurines, which integrate clay modeling with textile embroidery. Both types are historically associated with the Lantern Lighting ceremony, a fertility-related folk custom that has organized the social and ritual dimensions of clay sculpture production in the Chashan area for generations.

Despite its historical depth and provincial-level ICH status, systematic scholarly analysis of the artistic characteristics of Chashan clay sculpture remains underdeveloped. Existing research has prioritized heritage documentation and policy over analytical interpretation, leaving unanswered the question of how specific forms, colors, and craft techniques emerge, stabilize, and generate cultural meaning within a regional artistic system. The present study addresses this gap through an integrated theoretical framework comprising Sculpture Design Theory, Cultural Symbolism Theory, and National Identity Theory, organized around three analytical dimensions: design characteristics, regional characteristics, and cultural characteristics.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Dongguan clay sculpture has developed across four research orientations. Heritage-policy research has produced extensive empirical documentation but tends to treat clay sculpture as a protected object rather than an artistic system, prioritizing survival over analytical explanation (Smith, 2006). Folklore and local culture studies have illuminated the social embeddedness of clay sculpture within ritual systems and community structures, yet by treating sculptural form primarily as folklore material, they leave unanswered how form participates in symbolic construction (Turner, 1969). Art-historical approaches have begun to offer regional positioning and comparative stylistic analysis, situating Dongguan clay sculpture within the Lingnan folk art tradition (Ingold, 2013), but typically remain descriptive without explaining the generative mechanisms of observed formal conventions. Application-oriented research on cultural tourism and digital dissemination has expanded the contemporary visibility of the tradition while tending to compress complex symbolic structures into simplified consumable signs.

A critical synthesis reveals a consistent theoretical gap: the absence of an integrated analytical framework centered on "characteristics" as an explanatory category. Existing studies frequently reference the artistic features or cultural qualities of Dongguan clay sculpture without clarifying how design, regional context, and cultural meaning interact to produce a distinctive artistic paradigm. The present

study responds by developing a unified three-dimensional analytical framework grounded in Sculpture Design Theory, Cultural Symbolism Theory, and National Identity Theory.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Sculpture Design Theory

Sculpture Design Theory provides a systematic framework for analyzing how three-dimensional forms are conceived and communicated through visual organization and material practice. Sculptural form is understood as a visual language composed of interrelated elements—proportion, volume, structural articulation, spatial orientation, and implied movement—whose intelligibility depends on the internal logic of design rather than on external stylistic decoration (Pye, 2013). For folk clay sculpture, this theory requires conceptual adjustment: forms are simplified, stylized, or exaggerated not to compensate for limited technical capacity but to enhance legibility and symbolic clarity within collective social settings (Margolin, 2015). Materials are not passive carriers of form but active agents that condition what can be made and how it appears: clay's plasticity, temporality, and responsiveness directly influence modeling strategies and structural stability (Ingold, 2013).

3.2. Cultural Symbolism Theory

Cultural Symbolism Theory provides an interpretive framework for understanding how artistic forms operate as vehicles of shared meaning. Following Geertz (1973), symbols are understood as socially shared carriers of meaning whose significance emerges through collective interpretation and contextual use rather than through inherent formal properties. Clay sculpture functions as a "visualized cultural text" in which meaning is encoded through the coordinated organization of subject matter, color, ornamentation, and material choice. Symbolic meaning is not fixed but produced and reproduced through ritual practice, community narration, and repeated activation in communal contexts (Bell, 2009). Cultural symbolism is therefore an ongoing process of negotiation in which meaning is continually rearticulated in response to new audiences, institutional structures, and modes of circulation.

3.3. National Identity Theory

National Identity Theory conceptualizes identity as a socially constructed and continuously reproduced process embedded in narration, ritual practice, and symbolic communication (Anderson, 1983). In this study, "national" identity refers primarily to ethnic, local, and community-based identification rather than state-centered nationalism. Three mechanisms are analytically central: collective memory, through which shared values and historical experiences are condensed

into recognizable cultural forms; ritual and festive practice, through which identity is reinforced through embodied participation; and boundary-making, through which visual symbols and stylistic conventions mark community membership and cultural distinctiveness. Together, these mechanisms explain how Chashan clay sculpture participates in the ongoing construction of local communal identity amid social and cultural change.

4. Artistic Characteristics of Chashan Clay Sculpture

4.1. Design Characteristics

The design characteristics of Chashan clay sculpture constitute an integrated visual system organized around five interrelated dimensions: modeling language, subject repertoires, chromatic expression, decorative organization, and craft-form relations.

The modeling language is characterized by proportional exaggeration and symbolic typification. Figure proportions deviate from anatomical realism, with enlarged heads, simplified torsos, and condensed extremities that concentrate visual attention on facial expression and costume. This strategy enables rapid identification in communal ritual settings encountered from a distance. Frontal compositional structures dominate, ensuring visual legibility in contexts of public display, while rear surfaces are often simplified—a characteristic produced by the display logic of ritual and domestic contexts rather than by any deficiency of technical skill.

Subject repertoires are structured around four stable thematic categories: mythological and religious figures, operatic and theatrical characters, historical personages, and auspicious motifs. These categories function as a shared visual vocabulary enabling complex cultural narratives to be communicated through typified forms. The recurrence of specific deities associated with the Lantern Lighting ceremony reflects the intimate connection between sculptural subject matter and the ritual institutional framework of the Chashan tradition. Theatrical figures drawn from Cantonese opera form a second major category, with posture, costume, and facial coloration functioning as recognizable codes for character identity and moral status.

Chromatic expression is governed by a stable grammar of high-purity, high-contrast color relationships. Red and gold dominate auspicious and deital subjects, encoding blessedness, prosperity, and sacred authority. The polychromatic surface operates not as decoration applied to a pre-formed object but as an integral design component in which chromatic differentiation reinforces thematic identification and symbolic hierarchy. For silk-clad lantern figurines, the integration of embroidered textile with painted clay produces a complex chromatic field in which material texture and color interact to generate visual effects unavailable through clay alone.

Decorative organization follows a logic of surface saturation, in which available pictorial and ornamental surface is densely filled with cloud motifs, floral scrolls, geometric borders, and auspicious symbols. This density is not incidental but

functionally motivated: in ritual contexts, visual richness signals the symbolic weight and sacred authority of the figure. Pattern motifs are drawn from a stable regional repertoire shared with Lingnan embroidery, architectural decoration, and ceramic traditions, establishing visual continuity across the craft ecology of the Pearl River Delta.

The craft-form relationship is organized through a composite technique system integrating mold-based production, hand modeling, polychrome painting, and—for lantern figurines—textile embroidery. Mold-based production enables efficient reproduction of standardized body structures, while hand modeling at key junctures introduces individualized expressiveness. This hybrid logic generates a characteristic visual quality in which formal regularity and expressive detail coexist, reflecting the tradition's historical negotiation between efficiency of reproduction and artistic individuality.

4.2. Regional Characteristics

The regional characteristics of Chashan clay sculpture are constituted through three interrelated mechanisms: natural environment and material availability, folk institutional frameworks, and production structures and transmission modes.

The natural environment of the Pearl River Delta shapes clay sculpture production through soil composition, humidity, and material availability. The region's alluvial soils provide clay with specific plasticity properties that directly influence modeling strategies and structural stability. The humid subtropical climate imposes constraints on drying time and surface cracking, encouraging modular construction approaches and the development of composite material systems—particularly the clay-textile integration of silk-clad lantern figurines—as adaptive responses to environmental conditions.

The most consequential regional characteristic is the historical embedding of clay sculpture within the Lantern Lighting ceremony. This fertility-related folk custom has organized both the production calendar and the thematic repertoire of Chashan clay sculpture: figurines are produced and displayed in annual cycles aligned with the ceremony's ritual schedule, and subject matter is determined by the ritual functions objects are expected to perform. The ceremony constitutes a structural constraint on design, establishing stable demand for specific figurine types and maintaining the correspondence between formal conventions and ritual meaning across generations.

Production structures in the Chashan tradition have historically been organized through family-based workshops and apprenticeship systems in which craft knowledge is transmitted through embodied practice rather than explicit codification. This transmission mode creates a characteristic "local hand-feel"—a set of tacit formal conventions, proportional norms, and surface treatment strategies that constitute the aesthetic identity of the Chashan tradition and distinguish it from other regional clay sculpture practices. The entry of Chashan clay sculpture into ICH

governance frameworks and cultural tourism markets has introduced new organizational forms that coexist with traditional apprenticeship structures while reshaping the social conditions under which craft knowledge is validated.

4.3. Cultural Characteristics

The cultural characteristics of Chashan clay sculpture are analyzed through symbolic meaning layers and the value mechanisms through which these meanings gain social efficacy.

At the primary symbolic layer, iconographic conventions establish stable associations between visual form and cultural meaning: red-faced operatic characters signify loyalty and martial virtue; golden-robed deity figures signal sacred authority and protective power; child figures holding auspicious objects encode hopes for fertility and family continuity. These associations are maintained through repeated activation in ritual contexts where the same figures appear year after year in the same ceremonial roles, embedding symbolic associations in collective memory through experiential repetition.

A secondary symbolic layer operates through the decorative system. Cloud and wave patterns signify cosmic order and divine presence; peony and lotus motifs encode prosperity and purity; bat and fish imagery—homophones in Cantonese for "fortune" and "abundance"—mobilize a system of linguistic-visual punning running throughout Lingnan folk art. These motifs constitute a secondary symbolic register that enriches and contextualizes the primary iconographic meaning.

At the level of value mechanisms, Chashan clay sculpture generates social value through integration into the ritual life of the community, particularly the Lantern Lighting ceremony. The ceremony provides an annual occasion for public display, communal viewing, and collective emotional engagement, sustaining the social relations through which symbolic meanings are produced and reproduced. As the ritual context has weakened under pressures of social change, value has been partially rearticulated through ICH governance and cultural tourism, which reconstruct symbolic authority through institutional recognition. This rearticulation generates new forms of cultural and identity value while introducing tensions between locally grounded symbolic depth and publicly legible cultural surface.

The ethnic identity value of Chashan clay sculpture lies in its function as a medium through which the Chashan community articulates a distinctive local identity within the broader landscape of Lingnan culture. The recurrence of specific deities, subject types, and formal conventions creates a recognizable regional visual grammar signaling local membership and cultural continuity. At the same time, the tradition's embeddedness in Lingnan aesthetics—its vivid palette, narrative theatricality, and decorative richness—connects it to a broader regional cultural identity. This dual function, simultaneously local and regional, reflects the layered character of identity construction through material culture.

5. Discussion

The findings carry significant implications for understanding and managing contemporary transformation of Chashan clay sculpture. The three-dimensional analytical framework reveals that its artistic characteristics are not simply inherited aesthetic conventions but structured responses to specific social conditions: the ritual demands of the Lantern Lighting ceremony, the material constraints of Pearl River Delta environments, apprenticeship-based transmission systems, and the symbolic expectations of Lingnan community culture. Any process of contemporary transformation that alters these conditions without attending to their formal and symbolic consequences risks producing superficial modification rather than genuine creative development.

The most significant risk in contemporary contexts is not formal change per se but the decoupling of form from the symbolic and social mechanisms that generate meaning. When clay sculpture enters exhibition, tourism, and digital media contexts without its associated ritual practices, craft transmission structures, and community interpretive frameworks, visual forms may be preserved while value-generating mechanisms are attenuated. High-saturation colors and dense decorative patterns that function as symbolic rhetoric in ritual contexts risk being reinterpreted as merely decorative surface in exhibition settings, stripping them of cultural depth.

The study also identifies opportunities for value resilience. The composite craft system—integrating mold-based production with hand modeling, polychrome painting with textile embroidery—possesses inherent adaptability enabling formal innovation within a stable design grammar. Creative transformation proceeding from a systematic understanding of design conventions rather than superficial formal modification is more likely to preserve cultural depth while engaging new audiences. These findings suggest that ICH practitioners and cultural policymakers should focus less on formal preservation per se and more on maintaining the social conditions—ritual contexts, community participation, apprenticeship networks—through which symbolic meaning is continuously reproduced.

6. Conclusion

This study has conducted a systematic analysis of the artistic characteristics of Chashan handmade clay sculpture in Dongguan through an integrated framework comprising Sculpture Design Theory, Cultural Symbolism Theory, and National Identity Theory. The analysis has demonstrated that the artistic expression of Chashan clay sculpture constitutes a dialectical unity of technical rationality and folkloric sensibility, in which stylized modeling language, high-contrast chromatic strategies, dense decorative grammar, and composite craft techniques together constitute a regionally specific visual system.

The three-dimensional framework has revealed that these design characteristics are shaped by regional conditions—the Pearl River Delta environment, the Lantern

Lighting ceremony, apprenticeship-based transmission—and by cultural demands including the symbolic requirements of Lingnan ritual systems and the identity functions of local community practice. These dimensions interact to produce a distinctive regional artistic paradigm that cannot be adequately understood through formal description alone.

The study contributes three scholarly advances: an integrated analytical framework bridging formal analysis, cultural symbolism, and identity construction; a demonstration that "characteristics" can function as explanatory rather than merely descriptive categories; and practically grounded insights for the living transmission and creative transformation of Dongguan intangible cultural heritage. Future research should extend this framework to comparative analysis across Lingnan clay sculpture traditions and examine the conditions under which creative transformation in digital and global contexts can maintain value resilience.

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