

# Research on Development Strategies of Anhui Papermaking Craft in the Era of Image Economy

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the challenges and opportunities faced by Anhui papermaking craft in the era of the image economy and explores the strategies for cross-disciplinary integration of creative imagery with paper craft. By conducting in-depth research on the protection and inheritance of papermaking craft, innovative design and image fusion, market expansion and brand promotion, digital production and technological innovation, as well as the integration of cultural industries, this paper puts forward strategies and suggestions to promote the sustainable development of Anhui papermaking craft in the era of the image economy.

**Keywords:** Anhui papermaking craft; Image economy; Creative design; Traditional craft; Cross-disciplinary integration; Development strategies

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## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of information technology and the digital economy, the era of the image economy has profoundly changed the development model of traditional industries and cultural sectors. Image economy, as an emerging economic form, focuses on the production, dissemination, and consumption of images and visual content, covering fields such as photography, film, animation, design, and gaming <sup>[1]</sup>. Against this backdrop, the convergence of traditional crafts with the creative industry has become an inevitable trend. As one of China's intangible cultural heritages, the Anhui papermaking craft faces challenges and opportunities for continuous development and innovation in modern society. This paper aims to explore the cross-disciplinary integration of creative imagery with traditional crafts, analyze the current development status and challenges faced by Anhui papermaking craft in the era of the image economy, and propose feasible development strategies and recommendations.

## **2. Analysis of traditional and current state of Anhui papermaking craft**

Anhui papermaking craft, as one of China's intangible cultural heritages, has a long history and unique cultural value. Its origin can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty, evolving over thousands of years to form unique production techniques and cultural characteristics, making it an important representative of traditional handicrafts in Anhui and even across China.

### **2.1. Characteristics and Charm of Traditional Craft**

#### **2.1.1. Extensive craft of papermaking techniques**

The craft of papermaking is an extension and development of traditional papermaking techniques, transforming raw paper into processed paper through processes such as ingredients mixing, dyeing, sizing, powder filling, waxing, polishing, embossing, watermarking, gilding, mounting, painting, dyeing, and mothproofing. These processes prolong the lifespan of paper, enhance its practicality for writing and printing, or cater to artistic demands in calligraphy and painting, involving techniques in printing, carving, mounting, engraving, calligraphy, and painting.

#### **2.1.2. Papermaking is a fusion of paper and art, with powder-waxed paper as a representative**

Originating from the Tang Dynasty, powder-waxed paper was once used for imperial edicts. It cleverly combines water-absorbing "powder" and waterproof "wax", retaining the characteristics of easy writing and painting of traditional paper while maintaining smoothness and glossiness for hundreds of years. When gold and silver powder is used to draw various exquisite patterns on paper, it adds elegance and rich cultural attributes to powder-waxed paper. In recent years, fine powder-waxed paper from the Qing Dynasty has fetched auction prices exceeding 200,000 yuan.

#### **2.1.3. Revitalization of power-waxed paper**

The development of papermaking craft in modern Anhui peaked during the Qing Dynasty, with the production of powder-waxed paper reaching its pinnacle, but this craft was lost in the early 20th century. At the end of the 1990s, father-son duo Liu Xihong and Liu Jing successfully revived the traditional craft of making "powder-waxed paper" in Chaohu, Anhui, after years of exploration and experiments. They later established Duoyingxuan, which, based on inheriting traditional papermaking craft, restored and developed a series of paper products such as powder-waxed paper, mud-gold paper, and sheep brain paper, leading the trend of Chinese papermaking craft and driving the development of the entire papermaking industry in Anhui. In 2008, "Papermaking Craft" represented by powder-waxed paper was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list <sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2.2. Challenges and dilemmas facing modern Anhui papermaking**

### **2.2.1. Difficulty in inheritance**

The production process of the Anhui papermaking craft is highly complex, involving many traditional techniques that require profound skills and experience. However, with the advancement of industrialization and modernization, the younger generation's interest in traditional handicrafts has gradually waned, posing a threat to the inheritance of papermaking skills. Many master craftsmen are elderly and lack successors from the younger generation, which is a common problem faced by many intangible cultural heritage crafts, putting the inheritance of Anhui papermaking craft at risk.

### 2.2.2. New market demands

With the prevalence of digitization and paperless trends, the market share of traditional cultural products is gradually being impacted. The usage scope of traditional papermaking is shrinking, and with changing aesthetic and consumer concepts among modern people, the demand and expectations for paper products are also evolving. Traditional paper was mainly supplied to the royal family and top-level artists. For example, **Figure 1** shows a piece of “True Gold Hand-Painted Powder-Waxed Paper Porcelain Blue Dragon” from Duoyingxuan priced as high as 45,000 yuan <sup>[2]</sup>. However, not only is it expensive, but the intricate patterns painted on the paper, although exquisite and meticulous, do not align with the aesthetic tastes of contemporary consumers. Many traditional patterned and complex paper products face the risk of being out of sync with the tastes of modern consumers, who prefer relatively affordable paper products that suit contemporary aesthetic tastes.



**Figure 1.** “True Gold Hand-Painted Powder-Waxed Paper Porcelain Blue Dragon” from Duoyingxuan is priced as high as 45,000 RMB

### 2.2.3. Technological obstacles

The Anhui papermaking craft faces challenges in integrating modern technological methods, including production, design, and marketing. Many traditional papermaking crafts still rely on manual operations, limiting production efficiency and product diversification. Although Anhui papermaking craft has undergone modernization and innovation to some extent, it still faces difficulties in adapting to the requirements of contemporary cultural and creative industries, such as design innovation, market promotion, and brand building.

## 3. Cross-border integration of creative imagery and paper craft techniques

### 3.1. Concept and significance

Integrating creative imagery with traditional paper craft is an innovative art form. This fusion combines modern

image design with established craftsmanship, revitalizing traditional paper and expanding its artistic and market potential. This approach modernizes traditional crafts and explores new avenues in image art.

## **3.2. Practical examples and success stories**

### **3.2.1. Creative imagery and intangible cultural heritage techniques**

Historically, like during the Qing Dynasty, traditional paper often featured paintings and folk patterns, reflecting cultural and aesthetic values. However, today's traditional paper products struggle to innovate and meet contemporary tastes. In contrast, the 3,000-year-old Yuhang oil-paper umbrella, reimagined with modern aesthetics and showcased at the 2017 Milan Design Week, became a popular product for young consumers. This collaboration with modern designers demonstrated how traditional crafts can be revitalized through contemporary design. Similarly, collaborating with artists and using digital art techniques can transform paper crafts into unique art pieces and cultural products.

### **3.2.2. Design innovation and paper applications**

Some designers have successfully applied traditional ICH techniques to modern fields like packaging, gift customization, and art installations. By adapting traditional crafts and incorporating modern materials, they have expanded the application and commercial value of paper crafts. For example, Liu Jing, a paper craft expert, has worked with Central Academy of Fine Arts students to integrate modern design thinking into traditional paper-making, leading to innovative products. At the 2019 Shanghai Design Week, 38 pieces of cross-border fashion, incorporating 18 ICH techniques, were showcased, highlighting the perfect fusion of traditional crafts and modern fashion.

### **3.2.3. Cross-cultural communication and artistic creation**

Digital technology has facilitated the integration of ICH with modern aesthetics. For instance, Yiwen Group's "Embroider Database" and "Global Designer Space" connect over 1,600 designers with more than 8,000 ethnic patterns, enabling global collaborations. This platform has brought traditional crafts like Miao embroidery to the international stage. Anhui paper craft can adopt similar strategies by creating platforms for global collaboration to showcase its cultural and artistic value <sup>[4-6]</sup>.

These examples illustrate the successful integration of traditional ICH techniques with modern design, emphasizing the potential for cultural heritage to thrive in contemporary settings. These innovative approaches not only preserve the unique charm of traditional crafts but also provide new opportunities for their development and market expansion, offering valuable insights into the future of Anhui paper craft techniques.

## **4. Strategies for the development of Anhui papermaking craft in the image economy era**

In response to the challenges faced by Anhui papermaking craft in the era of the image economy, the following strategies are proposed to promote its sustainable development through cross-disciplinary integration, innovation, and market expansion.

### **4.1. Cross-disciplinary integration and creative imagery**

#### **4.1.1. Collaboration with artists and designers**

Foster collaborations between Anhui papermaking craftsmen and contemporary artists or designers to infuse

traditional paper products with modern artistic elements. This could include creating paper artworks, decorative items, or even fashion products that blend traditional techniques with contemporary aesthetics <sup>[6]</sup>.

#### **4.1.2. Exploration of new themes and styles**

Experiment with new themes, styles, and patterns that resonate with modern consumers. Incorporate elements inspired by nature, urban landscapes, or pop culture into traditional paper designs to attract younger audiences.

### **4.2. Innovative design and product diversification**

#### **4.2.1. Development of new product lines**

Expand beyond traditional paper products to develop diversified product lines that appeal to different market segments. This could include stationery, home decor items, gift packaging, or even specialty items for use in digital art and photography.

#### **4.2.2. Customization and personalization**

Offer personalized and customizable paper products to cater to individual preferences. This could involve bespoke stationery sets, event invitations, or unique artwork tailored to customer specifications.

### **4.3. Market expansion and brand promotion**

#### **4.3.1. E-commerce and online presence**

Establish a strong online presence through e-commerce platforms and social media to reach a broader audience beyond local markets. Leverage digital marketing strategies to showcase the craftsmanship and unique features of Anhui papermaking.

#### **4.3.2. Participation in cultural events and exhibitions**

Participate in regional and national cultural events, craft fairs, and exhibitions to raise awareness about Anhui papermaking and attract potential customers, collectors, and collaborators.

### **4.4. Digital production and technological innovation**

#### **4.4.1. Adoption of digital tools**

Integrate digital tools and technologies into the production process to enhance efficiency and precision while preserving traditional craftsmanship. This could include digital design software for pattern creation, laser cutting for intricate detailing, or digital printing for reproducing artwork.

#### **4.4.2. Research and development**

Invest in research and development to explore sustainable materials, eco-friendly processes, and innovative techniques that align with contemporary environmental and consumer trends.

### **4.5. Integration with cultural industries**

#### **4.5.1. Cultural tourism and heritage conservation**

Collaborate with local tourism authorities to promote Anhui papermaking as part of cultural tourism initiatives. Develop experiential workshops, heritage trails, and museum exhibits to engage visitors and educate them about the cultural significance of papermaking <sup>[3]</sup>.

#### 4.5.2. Education and training programs

Establish training programs and workshops to nurture the next generation of papermaking artisans. Encourage young people to appreciate and learn traditional crafts through hands-on experiences and mentorship programs.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of the Anhui papermaking craft in the era of the image economy requires a strategic approach that combines heritage preservation with innovation and market adaptation. By embracing cross-disciplinary collaborations, design innovation, digital integration, and cultural engagement, Anhui papermaking can not only survive but thrive in the modern era. It is essential to leverage the unique cultural heritage of Anhui papermaking as a source of inspiration and creativity to capture new market opportunities and ensure its sustainable development for future generations.

By implementing these strategies, Anhui papermaking craft can evolve into a vibrant and dynamic cultural industry that resonates with contemporary consumers while preserving its rich historical legacy and artistic traditions.

### Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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