

The Teaching Reform and Practice of Chinese Gongbi Painting Based on Lingnan Local Culture

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Abstract: This study examines the pedagogical reform of the “Chinese Gongbi Painting” curriculum rooted in Lingnan culture. It begins by analyzing the multifaceted nature of Lingnan culture, encompassing the distinctive characteristics and inclusive spirit of its Guangfu, Chaoshan, and Hakka cultural lineages. The paper highlights the dual significance of this reform: preserving Lingnan’s cultural heritage through regional elements to enhance the artistic expression of Gongbi painting, while innovating teaching methodologies to improve cultural education outcomes. Practical solutions are proposed through six approaches: restructuring course content, innovating technical modules, designing folk-themed projects, integrating cultural venue resources, establishing dual-teacher collaboration platforms, and optimizing assessment mechanisms. These measures aim to achieve deep integration between Gongbi painting instruction and Lingnan culture, cultivating artists with both traditional painting expertise and regional cultural awareness.

Keywords: Lingnan local culture; Chinese Gongbi painting course; teaching reform and practice

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1. Introduction

As a distinctive cultural form in the southern region beyond the Five Ridges, Lingnan culture embodies the wisdom of three major ethnic groups—Guangfu, Chaoshan, and Hakka. Rooted in the spirit of inclusiveness, pragmatism, and openness, it has developed unique characteristics across architecture, folklore, craftsmanship, and painting. Chinese Gongbi Painting, as a crucial medium for preserving traditional Chinese artistry, urgently needs to transcend the limitations of single-technique instruction in contemporary education by leveraging regional cultural heritage. This paper explores systematically integrating Lingnan cultural elements into Gongbi Painting courses through content restructuring, technique innovation, and practical expansion. The approach not only transforms Gongbi Painting into a vibrant vessel for inheriting Lingnan’s cultural legacy but also establishes the curriculum as an educational space bridging tradition and modernity, merging craftsmanship with cultural values. This provides a reference for localized innovation in traditional painting education.

2. Lingnan local culture

Lingnan culture, originating south of the Five Ridges, showcases distinct regional characteristics. The three major ethnic

groups—Cantonese, Chaoshan, and Hakka—each carry their unique heritage: Cantonese culture emphasizes urban sophistication, while Chaoshan culture preserves ancient charm with thriving agriculture and commerce. Hakka culture prioritizes cultural education, reflecting its inclusive nature through architectural and linguistic diversity. Its spiritual values balance practicality with tolerance, as seen in daily life through distinctive operas, festivals, culinary traditions, and crafts—all contributing to Lingnan’s cohesive yet multifaceted cultural tapestry^[1].

3. Value analysis of teaching reform of Chinese Gongbi Painting course based on Lingnan local culture

3.1. Inherit the cultural heritage of Lingnan and enrich the regional expression of meticulous painting

Integrating the essence of Lingnan culture into Gongbi painting courses represents a vibrant extension of regional cultural heritage. The unique water-and-powder collision techniques in traditional Lingnan paintings, combined with meticulous depictions of tropical landscapes and the fusion of Chinese and Western aesthetic values, preserve the cultural depth of diverse traditions such as Cantonese, Chaoshan, and Hakka cultures. By analyzing and extracting elements from Lingnan architecture, folk customs, and marine life, this program guides students to express Lingnan’s distinctive flora and fauna through meticulous brushwork paintings, such as mangroves, kapok trees, and bougainvillea. It also showcases local traditions including the Yingge Dance, Nu Dance, and Wuchuan Piaose parade, while highlighting characteristic architectural features like the Leizhou gable design inspired by the Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth). This approach liberates paintings from traditional subject constraints, creating a moist and ethereal Lingnan visual presentation. Such localized creations not only rescue nearly extinct folk arts but also infuse Gongbi painting with warm, contemporary textures and era-specific markers. After millennia of cultural refinement, this art form breathes new life through regional cultural nourishment, adding distinctive regional samples to China’s traditional art treasury. When students vividly depict Lingnan lion dances, red cotton trees, and dragon boat races in their paintings, they essentially use artistic practice to build cultural identity through bloodline connections.

3.2. Innovate teaching mode and improve the effectiveness of curriculum culture education

The curriculum restructuring rooted in regional cultural resources has liberated Gongbi painting education from the singular dimension of technical training, transforming it into a crucial foundation for cultural edification. When students practice copying original works by Lingnan pioneers like Ju Chao and Ju Lian, they directly encounter traditional craftsmanship spirit and innovative consciousness. Through field sketching, they deeply comprehend the ethical implications of brick carving patterns in Huo ‘er houses and the spiritual aspirations of blessing symbols in New Year paintings, achieving profound integration of technical exploration and cultural immersion^[2]. This teaching transformation empowered by cultural resources genuinely ignites students’ pride in local art and sense of responsibility for inheritance. Their creations transcend formal aesthetics, elevating to visual narratives of homeland memory and humanistic sentiment. The curriculum thus becomes fertile ground for nurturing students’ cultural self-awareness, completing the internalization process from cultural cognition to value recognition through Gongbi painting. This lays the foundation for cultivating new artistic talents who possess both traditional skills and regional cultural consciousness.

4. The teaching reform practice approach of “Chinese Gongbi Painting” based on Lingnan local culture

4.1. Explore the materials of Lingnan culture and reorganize the curriculum system

The “Chinese Gongbi Painting” curriculum should completely break free from traditional limitations in artistic sources,

focusing instead on the rich cultural treasures embedded in Lingnan's land. This requires systematic restructuring of course content, with in-depth research serving as the foundation. Carefully selected visual symbols and cultural emblems from Lingnan culture should be naturally integrated into all units of the syllabus and practical components^[3]. This is not merely about superficial element decoration, but rather reconstructing the curriculum framework around artistic essences like the Lingnan intangible heritage, the historical development trajectory and artistic pursuits of the Lingnan School of Painting. Teachers should guide students to form a three-dimensional learning path connecting "culture, imagery, and techniques" through material collection, pattern analysis, and cultural exploration. This transformation shifts the course from mere technical inheritance to an artistic experimental space that embodies regional cultural essence.

This course begins with Lingnan's intangible cultural heritage and the Lingnan School of Painting, reconstructing its content framework to expand on traditional motifs like flowers, birds, figures, and architecture in meticulous brushwork painting. For instance, it guides students to explore mangrove plants in mangrove forests, requiring them to use delicate brushstrokes and intricate decorative elements to create line drawings that capture the morphological characteristics of these aquatic plants.

Subsequently, students are guided to incorporate the innovative color application features of the Lingnan School of Painting—such as vivid colors and striking contrasts—to design color schemes for the line drawings with Lingnan-style characteristics. This approach not only inherits traditional meticulous painting techniques but also enables students to infuse modern aesthetic appeal into classical patterns while understanding the artistic features of the nine heritage crafts. Through practical implementation, learners gain profound insight into the interplay between Lingnan's craft art and painting.

4.2. Integrate the characteristics of Lingnan techniques and realize the innovation of technical teaching module

The core challenge in pedagogical reform lies in transcending traditional technical frameworks, allowing the unique genetic makeup of Lingnan painting to become a dynamic source of inspiration for students' artistic development. Innovations in technical instruction should focus on analyzing, refining, and transforming visual wisdom embedded in local artistic practices like the Lingnan School. This requires educators to design specialized modules such as thematic techniques for Lingnan imagery and experimental brushwork blending Chinese and Western approaches. By converting the eclectic spirit of Lingnan art into tangible, practice-oriented methodologies, teaching priorities must shift from mere imitation of classical works to understanding the cultural motivations and formal innovations behind technical choices.

For instance, the Lingnan School of Painting integrates Eastern and Western artistic essences while bridging historical traditions. This philosophy forms the core foundation for innovative technique instruction. During practical teaching sessions, dedicated modules can be established to explore Lingnan's cultural landscapes through sketching and artistic expression. When addressing iconic southern motifs like lychee trees, kapok vines, banana plants, and traditional Lingnan architecture, instructors should not only teach traditional Chinese meticulous brushwork techniques such as gongbi rendering and shading but also demonstrate the unique chiaroscuro methods of the Three Masters of Lingnan—Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren. Students are guided to observe and practice applying the bone method brushwork and delicate rendering techniques of Chinese gongbi alongside Western realistic lighting approaches. For example, when depicting dew-covered lychees, they learn to combine traditional layered shading with Gao Qifeng's technique of leaving blank areas or softening highlights on illuminated surfaces while intensifying shading on shaded sides to enhance light effects. When sketching kapok vines, students emulate Chen Shuren's resilient line interweaving and spatial layering techniques to convey the depth of dense forests. Through these practices, learners fully experience the practical charm and intrinsic essence of Lingnan's artistic techniques^[4].

4.3. Implement the design of thematic creative projects based on the folk customs of Lingnan

The vitality of the "Chinese Gongbi Painting" course stems from its deep integration with real-world cultural landscapes.

Thematic creative projects are designed to root in Lingnan's unique folk traditions, guiding students to capture visual narrative inspiration and emotional resonance through vibrant folk customs. The project design principles emphasize the unity of on-site experience, cultural interpretation, and artistic refinement. Instructors lead students to conduct sketching, documentation, and interviews at folk culture sites, enabling them to perceive ritual atmospheres and cultural significance. Students are then guided to synthesize personal experiences with social observations into Gongbi-themed creations that embody distinctive regional characteristics and profound spiritual depth. Such projects successfully bridge the gap between technical training and humanistic contemplation.

The design of this thematic creative project, inspired by the fish swimming on the northern slope of Suixi River, carries profound cultural significance. Students conduct field research in Suixi through sketching, photography, and interviews, carefully record the dynamic movements, the shapes of the fish lanterns, the details of the costumes and the fireworks scenes during the fish swimming performance. Meticulously documenting dynamic movements, lantern designs, costume details, and fireworks displays during the aquatic performances. Back in the classroom, they collaboratively select captivating storylines and vivid narratives—such as artisans weaving lantern frames—to develop detailed brushstroke designs. Students face creative challenges: rendering lanterns with precise linear strokes, depicting people holding lanterns during parades, integrating local folk aesthetics like vibrant lantern shapes, and skillfully arranging compositions to create a grand, heroic ceremonial atmosphere. Through contemporary folk elements, they offer a modern reinterpretation of traditional gongbi art while maintaining its essence.

4.4. Carry out joint efforts with Lingnan cultural venues to expand the space scale of practical teaching

School boundaries should not define art education. By integrating culturally significant local venues into regular off-campus teaching programs, we expand the practical scope of the “Chinese Gongbi Painting” curriculum. This collaborative approach creates immersive Lingnan art environments, enabling students to transition from static copying to research-based learning and innovative practice within authentic cultural contexts. The key lies in establishing sustainable mechanisms—such as signing agreements and co-developing course modules—with museums to ensure that abundant collections, exhibitions, and academic lectures are deeply integrated into classroom instruction.

For instance, collaborating with Lingnan Art Museum and intangible cultural heritage preservation bases to develop “Marine Gongbi” specialized courses. Students conduct field studies at cultural landmarks like the Pearl River Estuary Fishing Port and Nanhai Temple, combining sketches from Lingnan's marine biodiversity atlas with fishermen's daily scenes to blend traditional Gongbi techniques with oceanic elements. The curriculum incorporates live demonstrations by heritage inheritors. At Guangzhou Liwan District Party-Mass Service Center's children's Gongbi painting workshop, students learn line sketching and color rendering techniques to replicate classic marine artworks. Partnering with Xiguan Women's Calligraphy and Painting Association in Lingnan, they curated the “Silk Road Sails” exhibition, encouraging Gongbi-style recreations of local maritime life details like Tanka boat houses and fish-drying scenes. Additionally, cultural spaces like Foshan ICC International Commercial Center host thematic exhibitions showcasing student works such as “Red Mangrove Egret Shadows” and “Tanka Fishing Songs,” with artists providing live critiques on artistic techniques and cultural expression, forming an integrated “fieldwork-creation-curation” process. By integrating venue resources and local cultural symbols, this approach not only expands Gongbi painting education dimensions but also revitalizes marine heritage through modern artistic language, deepening students' understanding of Lingnan's oceanic cultural essence through immersive real-world experiences.

4.5. Introduce local intangible heritage inheritors in Lingnan and build a platform for double-teacher teaching

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) inheritors serve as living embodiments of Lingnan cultural DNA. Integrating them into the Gongbi painting curriculum through a dual-mentorship system where university faculty collaborate with ICH masters

can effectively address gaps in localized instruction, practical application, and cultural depth. This approach breaks the limitations of single-instructor models, fostering synergy between theoretical frameworks and hands-on practice while blending traditional craftsmanship with academic perspectives. The platform's success hinges on establishing precise collaboration mechanisms: Masters can lead workshops focusing on specific ICH techniques and Gongbi execution, providing on-site creative guidance. They may also co-develop creative themes rooted in these heritage projects, delivering students with vivid technical insights and profound cultural context that transcend textbook knowledge.

For instance, Cantonese opera, with its elaborate costumes and distinctive makeup techniques, serves as an ideal medium bridging the artistic expressions of meticulous brushwork painting. By inviting intangible cultural heritage inheritors specializing in provincial-level Cantonese opera facial makeup design or traditional costume pattern creation to serve as guest mentors, workshops combining opera visual arts and meticulous brushwork techniques are conducted. During these sessions, inheritors first systematically explain the symbolic color schemes and outlining techniques for specific roles like Cao Cao and Guan Yu, along with cultural meanings and painting methods of traditional costume patterns such as the cloud-dragon sea patterns on dragon robes and phoenix-petal motifs on female roles. The practical phase then begins, where inheritors guide students in applying meticulous brushwork techniques on silk or paper to recreate classic opera facial makeup designs like Gongsun Yan from "The Grand Investiture of the Six Kingdoms". They meticulously teach pigment mixing, draft positioning, line outlining, coloring, and face creation. University instructors focus on applying these techniques to broader meticulous brushwork creations—such as incorporating symbolic colors from facial makeup or decorative patterns from costumes—to enhance narrative tension and regional cultural characteristics, effectively transforming intangible cultural heritage resources into creative applications in meticulous brushwork art.

4.6. Create the evaluation scale of Lingnan style and improve the course assessment system

Course assessments serve as guiding beacons for steering students' learning trajectories. Moving beyond conventional art skill evaluation frameworks, establishing distinctive assessment criteria that encompass Lingnan cultural comprehension depth, regional stylistic expression capabilities, and the integration of traditional elements with personal innovation holds profound significance. These standards should guide students toward integrating superficial formal imitation with the cultivation of intrinsic cultural context understanding and personal artistic language exploration. Assessment methodologies require optimization: increasing the proportion of formative assessments such as conceptual proposals, sketches, and regional element analysis reports; expanding evaluation participants to include cultural studies experts and intangible cultural heritage specialists; and emphasizing Lingnan humanistic concerns in thematic creative assignments^[5].

For instance, when implementing this standard during the figure painting unit assessment period, exam questions could be designed as contemporary figure portraits showcasing Lingnan aesthetic characteristics. Specific criteria could be further refined as follows: 30% for research depth on reference materials such as Lingnan School figure modeling and classic Cantonese opera character designs; 30% for creative transformation skills in applying eclectic techniques to depict light and shadow structures, embody regional color preferences, and incorporate Lingnan aesthetic elements like Cantonese opera makeup details; 30% for the exquisite portrayal of characters 'spiritual essence through traditional gongbi (meticulous brushwork) techniques^[6]; and 10% for the overall presentation of recognizable Lingnan stylistic features. When creating a portrait of a Lingnan elder, if students analyze and absorb facial structure treatments and light-and-shadow rendering methods from Gao Jianfu's works during the research phase, master traditional techniques like layered shading and glazing to achieve three-dimensionality, and skillfully incorporate subtle Lingnan aesthetics—such as light spots resembling traditional Manchu window patterns or scenes of local fruits and vegetables—their work would be considered well-compliant with all requirements. This standard effectively guides students to create works rooted in Lingnan culture while preserving the essential essence of gongbi painting's intrinsic language.

5. Conclusion

The pedagogical innovation of the “Chinese Gongbi Painting” course rooted in Lingnan regional culture represents both a proactive inheritance of local cultural heritage and an innovative breakthrough in traditional painting education. Through practical approaches such as exploring quintessential elements of Lingnan culture, integrating local artistic techniques, and weaving cultural narratives, Gongbi painting not only showcases the distinctive “Lingnan style” but also enables students to establish profound connections with their cultural roots through brushwork practice. This reform breaks down the barriers between art education and regional culture, allowing Gongbi painting instruction to uphold traditional essence while radiating modern vitality. Ultimately achieving dual objectives of “technique preservation” and “cultural edification”, it provides a localized approach for contemporary inheritance of Chinese traditional art.

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