

Fostering Cultural Identity: A Study of Factors Influencing Students' Willingness to Carry on the Tradition of Literati Landscape Painting in Chinese Higher Education Art Programmes

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Abstract

In the context of globalisation and digitalisation, there is a marked disconnect between the transmission of Chinese literati landscape painting and students' acquisition and preservation of this tradition. This study employed stratified random sampling to collect 467 valid questionnaires, utilised structural equation modelling for path analysis, and conducted in-depth interviews with 15 respondents to investigate the mechanisms through which higher education in fine arts influences students' willingness to preserve literati landscape painting. The findings revealed that cultural identity exerts a significant mediating effect between the educational environment and the willingness to preserve this art form, with the influence of faculty guidance being the strongest ($\beta=0.671$); Qualitative analysis revealed that aesthetic enlightenment, identity negotiation and theoretical construction constitute a progressive process of cultural identity formation; however, whilst senior students maintain a deep sense of identity, their willingness to carry on the tradition is significantly weakened by employment pressures; differences in the educational ecosystems across different types of universities also influence the translation of identity into action. Based on these findings, educational reforms should strengthen the role of teaching staff as cultural ambassadors and, through progressive career guidance, help students balance their aspirations for tradition with practical demands.

Keywords: Chinese literati landscape painting, commitment to preservation, art education in higher education, PLS-SEM

1. Introduction

As a central vehicle for the aesthetic consciousness and spiritual aspirations of the Chinese people, the transmission of traditional Chinese literati landscape painting has shifted from the traditional master-apprentice system to the modern higher education system. As a cradle of cultural transmission and artistic innovation, higher art education is not only responsible for imparting brushwork and ink techniques, but also bears the responsibility of reshaping the cultural identity of the younger generation.

Against the dual backdrop of globalisation and digital transformation, the education of traditional Chinese literati landscape painting faces severe challenges. Although art departments in higher education institutions have generally established comprehensive curriculum systems for landscape painting, a significant disconnect between students' 'acquisition' and 'transmission' of this art form is evident in actual teaching practice. This study aims to reveal the key factors influencing students' willingness to carry forward literati landscape painting, along with the pathways through which these factors operate, by conducting an in-depth analysis of the interactive relationship between art education practices in higher education and students' cultural identity.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study explores three core issues in depth:

1) Through in-depth research, it examines the current status and challenges regarding the transmission and development of Chinese literati landscape painting within the contemporary educational system; clarifies the intrinsic

logic between art education in higher education institutions and the transmission of literati landscape painting; and explores the qualitative factors and multidimensional pathways through which the willingness to transmit literati landscape painting and a sense of cultural identity are formed during the educational process.

2) Drawing upon established theories, this study constructs an explanatory model of the relationship between higher education art programmers and the willingness to preserve literati landscape painting. It identifies and validates the driving factors influencing students' willingness to preserve this art form within the practical context of Chinese higher education art programmers. Furthermore, it explores the relationship between higher education art programmers and the preservation of literati landscape painting within the contemporary socio-cultural context, and clarifies innovative pathways for the modern transformation of traditional art and the preservation of cultural heritage.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) Which factors in the practice of art education at Chinese universities have a significant influence on students' willingness to carry on the tradition of literati landscape painting?
- 2) Does the process of developing a sense of cultural identity within the university art education environment play a significant mediating role in students' willingness to carry on the tradition of literati landscape painting?
- 3) How do art students perceive the relationship between the innovative evolution and the preservation of literati landscape painting? What underlying psychological barriers prevent them from translating their technical training into a willingness to carry on the tradition?

1.3 Research Framework

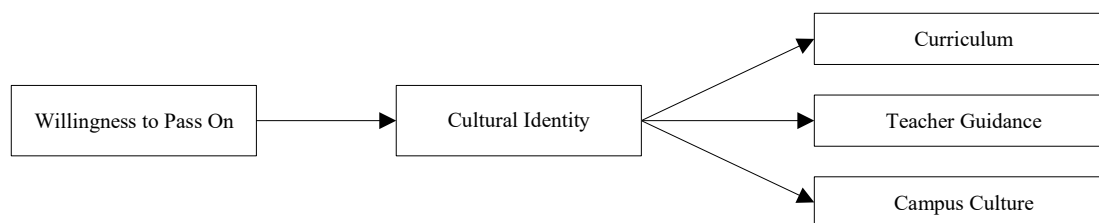


Figure 1. Research Framework

1.4 Significance of the Research

This study focuses on the education of Chinese literati landscape painting and explores the factors influencing students' intentions to carry on this tradition from the perspective of traditional art education in higher education institutions. Its innovative aspects lie in the following:

Theoretical level: By introducing the Theory of Planned Behavior and Cultural Identity Theory to construct an integrated model, this study expands the scope of application of Cultural Identity Theory, reveals the formation mechanisms and pathways of cultural identity in art education, and provides a new perspective for understanding the cultural functions of art education.

Practical level: This study provides empirical feedback for the reform of art education in higher education and the practice of transmitting literati landscape painting. It offers empirical evidence for curriculum design, innovation in teaching methods, and the professional development of teachers in higher education art programmers. Consequently, it assists educators in identifying psychological disconnects experienced by students during the transmission process, thereby promoting a shift in the teaching of literati landscape painting from the transmission of technical skills to the transmission of culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Historical Evolution and Contemporary Status of Literati Landscape Painting

2.1.1 The Origins and Formation of Schools in Literati Landscape Painting

Literati landscape painting took its first steps during the Southern and Northern Dynasties; during the Sui and Tang dynasties, blue-and-green landscape painting—represented by Zhan Ziqian and the Li brothers—and ink-wash landscape painting—represented by Wu Daozi and Wang Wei—emerged, marking the initial formation of landscape

painting as an art form; From the Five Dynasties to the Northern Song Dynasty, artists such as Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Li Cheng and Fan Kuan established the Northern School of landscape painting, whilst Dong Yuan and Ju Ran formed the Southern School. At the same time, literati painting, championed by Su Shi, Wen Tong and Mi Fu, gradually emerged, creating a diverse and coexisting artistic landscape (Zhao G.S. 2022); Scholar landscape painting truly came of age during the Yuan dynasty, when scholars such as Huang Gongwang and Wang Meng dominated the art world, establishing the aesthetic paradigm and cultural value of scholar painting (Jiao, H. 2025).

2.1.2 The Evolution of Cultural Functions from Traditional to Contemporary

Since the beginning of the 20th century, literati landscape painting has undergone a transformation of identity amidst the 'Eastward spread of Western learning' and social upheaval. This process has been accompanied by a reconfiguration of the language of brush and ink; artists have sought to retain the traditional flavour whilst incorporating Western painting techniques such as perspective, light and shadow, and a sense of volume, in order to align with the aesthetic sensibilities of the modern audience (Liu, Y. X. 2023). In the contemporary context, the transmission of landscape painting is no longer confined to the replication of ancient brushwork techniques, but rather seeks to strike a balance between contemporary life experiences and globalised aesthetics. This evolution reflects shifts in China's social structure, ideological concepts and aesthetic orientations, whilst also placing new demands on the knowledge base and aesthetic perspectives of those carrying on the tradition.

2.1.3 Aesthetic Innovation in the Post-Digital Era

Innovation in the digital era is no longer confined to changes in visual form, but delves into the very essence of the medium and the realm of sensory interaction. Contemporary artists and educators have begun to explore the use of digital modelling, multimedia interaction and visualisation technologies to transform traditional two-dimensional artistic concepts into three-dimensional or dynamic sensory experiences. This innovation deconstructs and reconstructs the characteristics of traditional imagery through technology and industrial aesthetics (Feng, X. W. 2022), yet it has already sparked academic debate regarding whether the introduction of new technologies into traditional art will erode its spiritual essence.

2.2 *The Current State of Teaching and Practice in Chinese Landscape Painting in Higher Education*

2.2.1 Changes in Teaching Methods

Current landscape painting education in higher education institutions is exploring the implementation of diverse teaching methods, with educational objectives shifting from cultivating individual artistic refinement to nurturing art professionals with comprehensive skills. Many institutions have begun to experiment with interdisciplinary workshops, digital tracing support systems and immersive cultural field trips, alongside the use of multimedia tools to visualise and analyse the details of ancient Ming and Qing dynasty paintings, enabling students to understand the structural logic of landscape composition from the perspective of material culture (Yang, S. Y. 2024). These diverse explorations aim to engage students by enhancing the interactivity and appeal of teaching.

2.2.2 Key Issues and Challenges in Teaching

The core issue in the transmission of landscape painting within the higher education context lies in the disconnect between the technical acquisition of skills and the aesthetic context of emotional resonance. Contemporary students' daily lives are saturated with electronic screens and popular culture, placing them at a considerable distance from the aesthetic sensibilities of seclusion and tranquillity pursued by literati painting (Jiao, H. 2025); Driven by employment pressures and the commercial art market, traditional landscape painting programmes are often perceived by students as offering poor career prospects (Li, D., & Wei, K. 2023). This utilitarian tendency has severely undermined students' long-term enthusiasm for the tradition. This predicament means that the willingness to carry on the tradition is not merely an educational issue, but has become a complex sociological and psychological problem.

2.2.3 Innovative Practices and Development Trends in Curriculum Design

Faced with the challenges in teaching literati landscape painting, some universities have begun to explore innovative approaches to teaching. These innovative practices are primarily reflected in the restructuring of the teaching system, the reform of teaching methods, and the deepening of cultural significance (Xue, F., & Dong, Y. 2022). However, the current tendency towards standardisation in the curriculum of fine arts education at Chinese universities places an emphasis on technical proficiency and the perfection of imagery, whilst neglecting the ancient literary and philosophical foundations that underpin the essence of landscape painting. Consequently, the teaching content and curriculum structure exhibit significant structural flaws. This has led to a tendency to 'prioritise technique over philosophy' in the teaching process, making it difficult for students to develop a deep emotional resonance with

traditional values.

2.3 The Theoretical Framework of the Will to Transmit and Cultural Identity

2.3.1 Mechanisms and Correlations of the Will to Pass on a Legacy

As an intrinsic motivation for individuals to actively participate in cultural transmission, the formation mechanism of the willingness to transmit is closely linked to cultural identity. From the perspective of educational behaviourism, the willingness to transmit is defined as the subjective psychological inclination—arising spontaneously after an individual has received relevant arts education—to protect, perpetuate, and, on this basis, preserve and innovate the artistic form in question (Le Zhou, A., & Zhang, K. 2024). In empirical research, the formation of an individual's willingness to transmit cultural heritage involves three dimensions—cognitive, emotional and behavioural—with cultural identity running through the interactive processes across these three dimensions (Jia, Y. X., & Tan, H. Y., 2023).

2.3.2 The Relationship Between the Essence of Cultural Identity and the Transmission of Art

Cultural identity—defined as an individual's or group's awareness of, identification with, and sense of belonging to their own cultural traditions, values and way of life—constitutes a vital psychological foundation for the transmission of art. In the context of artistic transmission, cultural identity serves as the key link connecting traditional art with contemporary practitioners. The formation of cultural identity involves the internalisation and acceptance of specific cultural symbols and values during an individual's socialisation process; this process directly influences an individual's receptiveness to traditional cultural arts and their willingness to transmit them (Chen, Y., & Zhou, Y. 2024). Theories of cultural identity provide a vital theoretical perspective for understanding artistic transmission, revealing the central role of cultural identity in this process; that is, cultural identity serves not only as the psychological foundation of artistic transmission but also as its intrinsic driving force.

2.3.3 The Impact of Educational Interventions on Students' Attitudes

Previous research has shown that cultural identity, as a behavioural orienter, can guide and reshape an individual's values and attitudinal orientations. In the field of the transmission of literati landscape painting, cultural identity influences students' understanding of the cultural value of literati landscape painting, as well as their emotional attitudes and behavioural choices (Zhang, Y. 2023); When art education in higher education institutions succeeds in revealing the connections between traditional culture and modern life, as well as the practical relevance of such traditions, students' learning attitudes shift from a passive fulfilment of academic requirements to an active exploration and preservation of cultural heritage. Furthermore, as an integration of cognition and emotion, cultural identity plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' understanding of and emotional connection to artistic traditions. If students are made to recognise the unique competitive advantages of literati landscape painting, their motivation to preserve and transmit this tradition will be significantly enhanced.

2.4 A Review of Research on Factors Affecting the Effectiveness of Art Education and Its Limitations

2.4.1 An Empirical Study of Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Art Education

Existing research predominantly employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to systematically analyse the structure and mechanisms of factors influencing the effectiveness of arts education. The arts education environment is regarded as a key factor influencing students' creativity and artistic literacy, whilst factors affecting teaching effectiveness primarily include the depth, breadth and coherence of the curriculum; research on interdisciplinary arts courses indicates that combining traditional painting with modern theory and digital technology can significantly enhance students' curiosity; teachers' professional competence, in turn, influences the effectiveness of arts education (Lv, J. Y. 2023).

2.4.2 Limitations of Existing Research

A comprehensive review of domestic and international literature reveals that, whilst art history and theory or technical analysis are characterised by great depth, they lack empirical data from the field of educational science to support them; furthermore, there is a scarcity of research on the teaching of traditional art forms, such as literati landscape painting, at the higher education level; Meanwhile, research on macro-level educational policies, whilst emphasising the enhancement of cultural confidence, is largely confined to single disciplines such as pedagogy and psychology, lacking interdisciplinary theoretical integration; consequently, it lacks psychological insights into the complex transformative mechanisms within art education (Wang, Y. 2025). Furthermore, the majority of research on landscape painting instruction remains confined to the superficial characteristics of traditional models, lacking exploration of deeper psychological mechanisms such as cultural identity. Future research should deepen the application of cultural identity

theory within traditional art education at the higher education level and construct a multidimensional, multi-layered theoretical framework.

2.5 Research Hypotheses

Building on the theoretical foundations discussed above, this study proposes four hypotheses concerning the pathways through which the educational environment shapes students' willingness to carry on the tradition of literati landscape painting. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour holds that behavioural intention is shaped by underlying beliefs and attitudes that are themselves conditioned by an individual's surrounding environment; cultural identity theory further specifies that identification with a cultural tradition mediates the translation of environmental influence into sustained commitment (Chen & Zhou, 2024). On this basis, the following hypotheses are advanced, corresponding to the structural paths tested in Section 3.5.1 and reported in Table 6:

H1: Curriculum design has a significant positive effect on students' cultural identity.

H2: Teacher guidance has a significant positive effect on students' cultural identity.

H3: Campus culture has a significant positive effect on students' cultural identity.

H4: Cultural identity has a significant positive effect on students' willingness to carry on the tradition of literati landscape painting.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, following a logical sequence of quantitative analysis first and qualitative analysis second; this design is based on the mixed-methods research framework proposed by Creswell and Plano Clark (2017). The quantitative study utilises a large-scale questionnaire to establish statistical models, exploring the pathological relationships between the educational environment, cultural identity and the willingness to pass on traditions; the qualitative study employs in-depth interviews to supplement and deepen the quantitative findings, revealing the psychological motivations and cognitive processes underlying students' decisions regarding cultural transmission.

The rationale for this research design lies in the fact that the process by which education influences the willingness to transmit cultural heritage is a complex psychosocial process. Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasised in their reflective thematic analysis that mixed methods can yield a deeper understanding through the complementarity of data. The combination of these two methods ensures that the research possesses both the external validity of statistical inference and a deeper understanding of the complex process of cultural transmission.

3.2 Research Locations and Sample

3.2.1 Selection of Research Locations

The selection of research locations was based on a combination of geographical distribution and institutional type. The study centred on Beijing, whilst also covering Hebei Province and Tianjin. The research focused on higher education institutions offering programmes in Chinese literati painting and traditional painting, particularly those with independent art colleges or art departments. This approach not only reflects the core centres of higher art education in China but also facilitates the collection of a sufficient sample of target institutions.

3.2.2 Sample Selection

1) Quantitative Research Sample

The quantitative study focused on undergraduate and postgraduate students majoring in Chinese painting or related fine arts disciplines at Chinese higher education institutions. This group comprises the direct recipients of education in the tradition of literati landscape painting and its potential practitioners. A stratified random sampling method (Kline, 2023) was employed to ensure a balanced representation of students across different year groups, genders and types of higher education institutions. The researchers employed a combination of an online survey platform and on-site distribution to administer the questionnaires continuously over a period of 6–8 weeks. After excluding invalid responses, a total of 467 valid questionnaires were obtained.

2) Qualitative research sample

The qualitative research employed purposive sampling and maximum diversity sampling strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Based on the findings from the quantitative phase, 15 respondents were selected from the students who had

participated in the questionnaire survey. The selection criteria focused on the extremes and representativeness of the sample, including five students each from the high, medium and low groups in terms of willingness to pass on traditions. The sample spanned different year groups from first-year undergraduates to postgraduates, and covered various academic backgrounds such as Chinese painting, art studies, and calligraphy and seal carving.

3.3 Research Instruments

3.3.1 Quantitative Research Instruments: Questionnaire Scales

For this study, a self-designed questionnaire was developed using a 5-point Likert scale. It comprises 42 items and is divided into four sections (Table 1).

Table 1. The Dimensional Structure of the Questionnaire Scale

Questionnaire Section	Sub-dimensions	Item	Main content
Demographics	—	6	Gender, year group, subject, type of higher education institution, etc.
Educational Background	Curriculum	6	Curriculum structure, cultural foundations, interdisciplinary integration
	Teacher Guidance	5	Teachers' expertise, enthusiasm and personalised guidance
	Campus Culture	5	Exhibition talks, artistic atmosphere, peer influence
Cultural Identity	Cognitive Dimension	5	A Theoretical Understanding of Landscape Painting
	Emotional Dimension	5	Aesthetic resonance and a sense of spiritual belonging
	Behavioural Tendencies	4	Active Learning and Future Career Planning
Willingness to Pass on Cultural Heritage	—	6	Career Aspirations and Commitment to Heritage

The educational environment dimension comprises three sub-dimensions: curriculum design, teacher guidance and campus culture, which are used to assess the educational ecosystem that influences students' willingness to carry on the tradition. The cultural identity dimension comprises three sub-dimensions: cognitive, emotional and behavioural tendencies. These measure students' theoretical understanding of landscape painting, their aesthetic resonance and sense of spiritual belonging, as well as their practical commitment to active participation and future planning, reflecting the process by which students move from cognition and emotion to action. The behavioural tendencies sub-dimension was measured with four items rather than five; this narrower item pool followed the pilot study, in which a fifth item was dropped for cross-loading with the emotional dimension, and the remaining four items still produced acceptable indicators of convergent validity and reliability ($\alpha = 0.878$, CR = 0.89, AVE = 0.63, Table 3), which supports treating it as a distinct sub-dimension despite the reduced item count; this trade-off between item economy and statistical robustness is discussed further as a limitation in Section 6.3. The willingness to preserve and pass on this tradition serves as the study's ultimate dependent variable. Prior to the formal survey, the researchers conducted a pilot study (n=30) and adjusted the wording of the questions based on student feedback.

3.3.2 Qualitative Research Tools: Interview Guide

This study employed semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was designed based on the theoretical framework and preliminary findings from the quantitative research, covering the process by which students form their perceptions of landscape painting and the shifts in their attitudes (Table 2). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Throughout the interviews, the researchers adhered to the principles of neutrality and empathy, encouraging participants to share specific experiences. Participants were also invited to present representative examples of their landscape paintings, and their creative ideas were explored in depth through discussions of these works. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent; the researchers transcribed the recordings within 24 hours and kept reflective journals to document non-verbal cues and initial insights.

Table 2. Key Topics for the Interview Outline

Interview Topics	Main Content
First impressions and understanding	First encounter with literati landscape painting and my initial impressions
Transitions in the educational process	Changes in the Understanding of and Attitudes Towards Landscape Painting in Higher Education Art Programmes
The impact of the educational environment	The Impact of Campus Cultural Activities and Teacher Guidance on the Transmission of Knowledge
A Shift in Mindset and Attitude	Psychological challenges and shifts in mindset during the learning process
Real-world pressures and choices	Reflections on Heritage and Career in the Face of Employment Pressure
Innovation and Cognition	An understanding of the relationship between innovation and tradition
Future Plans	My specific vision for my future work in landscape painting

3.4 Data Collection and Processing

3.4.1 Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data was collected through a combination of an online questionnaire platform and offline distribution. With the assistance of teachers, the researchers distributed the questionnaires in bulk during breaks or after lessons, or sent online links via WeChat and QQ. The questionnaire included control questions to identify respondents who had not answered carefully. Upon collection, questionnaires were excluded if they contained missing responses to key items, had a missing data rate exceeding 10%, exhibited obvious patterns of systematic responses, or contained inconsistent answers to the attention check questions. Data with a missing rate of less than 10% were imputed using the column mean method. Data cleaning and coding were performed in SPSS 26.0; all items were scored positively, with reverse-scored items converted accordingly.

3.4.2 Qualitative Data Collection

Once the transcripts of the 15 interviews had been completed, the researcher conducted a preliminary review to ensure accuracy. Some of the transcripts were returned to two participants for confirmation of content accuracy; this is a crucial aspect of member checking, which helps to enhance data accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2019). All interviews were audio-recorded following the obtaining of informed consent, and the researcher maintained a reflective journal to document non-verbal cues and initial insights.

3.5 Data Analysis Methods

3.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis comprises six stages: 1) Descriptive statistical analysis, calculating the mean, standard deviation and other basic characteristics of the sample and the main variables; 2) Reliability and validity testing, using Cronbach's α to assess internal consistency, conducting EFA and CFA tests, and calculating CR and AVE; 3) Correlation analysis, calculating Pearson's correlation coefficients; 4) Structural equation modelling analysis, using AMOS to conduct path analysis and test hypotheses H1–H4; 5) Testing of mediating effects using the Bootstrap method, with 5,000 samples drawn to calculate 95% confidence intervals; 6) Multi-group analysis, grouping by year, gender and type of higher education institution, and using the chi-squared test for differences.

3.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis employed thematic analysis. The specific process involved: 1) familiarisation with the data and preliminary coding, reading the text line by line to perform open coding; 2) Focused coding and theme emergence, clustering codes based on semantic similarity; 3) Theme refinement and theoretical linking, relating themes to the theoretical framework; 4) Coding reliability testing, inviting researchers from the same field to conduct independent coding (Cohen's Kappa ≥ 0.75) and performing inter-rater reliability checks; 5) Final reporting and integration of qualitative and quantitative findings, linking themes to the path model.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adheres to academic ethical standards. All participants provided fully informed consent; all data has been de-identified; interview recordings and transcripts were used solely for research purposes and were deleted upon

completion of the analysis; the reporting of research findings will not adversely affect any individual or organisation; and the study has received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board.

4. Results

4.1 Sample Characteristics

The quantitative study collected a total of 467 valid questionnaires. Female students accounted for 57.8% of the sample, whilst male students accounted for 42.2%. In terms of year group distribution, there were 116 first-year students, 116 second-year students, 124 third-year students and 83 fourth-year students, along with 28 postgraduate students. In terms of academic background, 183 students were specialising in Chinese painting, 164 in Fine Arts, 79 in Calligraphy and Seal Carving, and 41 in other fine arts disciplines. By region, the sample comprised 214 respondents from Beijing, 104 from Tianjin, and 149 from Hebei. The study was conducted across three regions—Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei—with 194 participants from art academies, 186 from art departments at normal universities, and 87 from art departments at comprehensive universities.

The qualitative study selected 15 respondents, comprising 6 males and 9 females. By year of study, there were 2 first-year students, 2 second-year students, 4 third-year students, 4 fourth-year students and 3 postgraduate students. The respondents came from three different types of higher education institutions; the selection criteria were based on scores for the intention to carry on the tradition in the quantitative questionnaire, with typical representatives chosen from the high, medium and low score groups to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample.

4.2 Reliability and Validity of the Scale

In this study, the scale underwent reliability and validity testing; the specific results are shown below (Table 3).

Table 3. Reliability and Validity Measures of the Scale

Scale Dimensions	α	CR	AVE
Willingness to Pass on Traditions	0.870	0.88	0.62
Cultural Identity – Emotional	0.877	0.89	0.63
Cultural Identity – Behavioural	0.878	0.89	0.63
Cultural Identity – Cognitive	0.837	0.85	0.59
Teacher Guidance	0.825	0.84	0.58
Curriculum	0.802	0.82	0.55
Campus Culture	0.729	0.74	0.48
CFA Fit Indices	$\chi^2/df = 2.18$	CFI = 0.92	RMSEA = 0.054

The Cronbach's α coefficients for all scale dimensions met the acceptance criteria set out by Tavakol & Dennick (2011). Among these, the scale for willingness to pass on traditions had the highest α coefficient (0.870), whilst the campus culture dimension had the lowest (0.729), though this still met the acceptable standard. The construct reliability (CR) of each scale ranged from 0.74 to 0.89, and the average variance extracted (AVE) ranged from 0.48 to 0.63, both meeting validity requirements (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; $CR \geq 0.70$, $AVE \geq 0.50$). It should be noted that the AVE for campus culture (0.48) fell marginally below the 0.50 threshold; however, following Fornell and Larcker (1981), convergent validity can still be considered acceptable when composite reliability exceeds 0.60, which was the case here ($CR = 0.74$), and this dimension's Cronbach's α (0.729) also met the conventional 0.70 cut-off, so the item was retained rather than removed. The fit indices for confirmatory factor analysis were favourable: $\chi^2/df = 2.18 < 3$, $CFI = 0.92 > 0.90$, and $RMSEA = 0.054 < 0.08$, all meeting acceptable standards (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

4.3 Correlation Analysis and Path Modelling

To further analyse the relationships between variables, this study first conducted descriptive statistics on the main variables (Table 4), and subsequently calculated the correlation coefficients between the variables (Table 5).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for the Main Variables

Variables	M	SD	Min	Max
Curriculum	3.44	0.42	2.33	4.50
Teacher Guidance	3.41	0.48	2.00	4.80
Campus Culture	3.32	0.41	2.00	4.40
Cultural Identity	3.42	0.52	1.20	4.78
Willingness to pass on	3.17	0.51	1.67	4.33

The mean scores for each variable ranged between 3.17 and 3.44, indicating that students' overall level of agreement regarding the educational environment, cultural identity and willingness to preserve cultural heritage was moderate. The mean score for willingness to preserve cultural heritage was the lowest ($M = 3.17$), while cultural identity showed the highest standard deviation ($SD = 0.52$), only marginally above the SD of 0.51 for willingness to pass on traditions, suggesting that students' views on both constructs were relatively dispersed. The average score for campus culture was the second highest ($M = 3.32$), with the smallest standard deviation ($SD = 0.41$), indicating that students' perceptions of the artistic atmosphere on campus were relatively consistent.

Table 5. Correlation Coefficients of the Main Variables

Variables	Curriculum	Teaching Staff	Campus	Agree	Legacy
Curriculum	1.00				
Teacher Guidance	0.55	1.00			
Campus Culture	0.55	0.52	1.00		
Cultural Identity	0.30	0.69	0.31	1.00	
Willingness to pass on	0.28	0.57	0.26	0.78	1.00

Note: * $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$.

The correlation coefficient between cultural identity and willingness to preserve cultural heritage was the highest at $r = 0.78$ ($p < 0.01$), indicating that the relationship between the two is the strongest. All three dimensions of the educational environment were significantly correlated with cultural identity; among these, the correlation coefficient for teacher guidance was the strongest at $r = 0.69$ ($p < 0.01$), whilst that for campus culture was the weakest at $r = 0.31$ ($p < 0.01$).

The results of the path analysis from the structural equation model are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Path Analysis Results

	Path	β	SE	p	95% CI
Direct Effects	Curriculum→Cultural Identity	0.344	0.044	<0.01	[0.258, 0.430]
	Teacher Guidance→Cultural Identity	0.671**	0.034	<0.01	[0.604, 0.739]
	Campus Culture→Cultural Identity	0.332	0.044	<0.01	[0.246, 0.418]
	Cultural Identity→Willingness to pass on	0.715**	0.032	<0.01	[0.651, 0.779]
Indirect Effects	Course→Agree→Legacy	0.246	-	<0.01	[0.158, 0.352]
	Teaching Staff→Agree→Legacy	0.480**	-	<0.01	[0.381, 0.597]
	Campus→Agree→Legacy	0.238	-	<0.01	[0.153, 0.339]

A structural equation model was employed to analyse the mechanisms through which three environmental factors influence the intention to pass on cultural heritage (Figure 1). The results indicate that teacher guidance ($\beta = 0.671$, $p < 0.01$), curriculum design ($\beta = 0.344$, $p < 0.01$) and campus culture ($\beta = 0.332$, $p < 0.01$) all have a significant positive impact on cultural identity, with teacher guidance having the strongest effect. Cultural identity had the strongest direct effect on the intention to pass on the culture ($\beta = 0.715$, $p < 0.01$). As no direct paths from the three environmental factors to willingness to pass on traditions were retained in the model, their effects on willingness to pass on traditions were transmitted entirely through cultural identity (full mediation); the indirect effects reported in Table 6 (0.246, 0.480 and 0.238 respectively) correspond to the product of each factor's path coefficient on cultural identity and

cultural identity's path coefficient on willingness to pass on traditions ($\beta = 0.715$), confirming the key mediating role of cultural identity. Model fit indices were favourable: $\chi^2/df = 3.52$ (<5.0), CFI = 0.950 (>0.90), and RMSEA = 0.087 (<0.10), indicating that the established theoretical model aligns well with the actual data. Analysis of variance revealed that educational environment factors accounted for 45.2% of the variance in cultural identity, whilst cultural identity accounted for 51.1% of the variance in the intention to preserve cultural heritage. A comprehensive analysis indicates that the educational environment influences students' intention to preserve cultural heritage by altering their cultural identity, with cultural identity being the most critical factor influencing this intention.

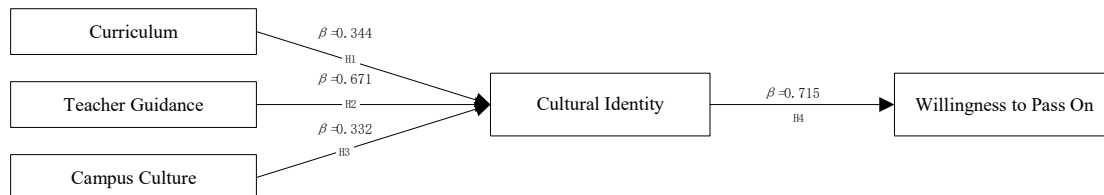


Figure 1. Mechanisms Underlying the Influence of the Educational Environment on the Willingness to Pass on Cultural Heritage

4.4 Multi-Group Analysis

To further explore differences in path relationships across different groups, this study conducted a multi-group analysis based on year group, gender and type of higher education institution; the specific differences in path coefficients are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Differences in Path Coefficients by Year Group, Gender and Type of Higher Education Institution

Grouping Variables	Groups	Curriculum→Agree	Teaching Staff→Agree	Agree→Legacy
Year group	First-year	0.41	0.64	0.74
	Second-year	0.36	0.70	0.77
	Third-year	0.31	0.61	0.67
	Fourth-year	0.25	0.71	0.75
Gender	Male	0.34	0.64	0.71
	Female	0.34	0.69	0.72
Type of higher education institution	College of Fine Arts	0.34	0.66	0.74
	University of Education	0.34	0.65	0.68
	Comprehensive University	0.36	0.74	0.72

Note: Indicates a significant difference between groups ($p < 0.05$); all path coefficients are significant ($p < 0.01$)

A stratified analysis by year group reveals that the influence of the curriculum on cultural identity follows a decreasing trend, falling from 0.41 in the first year to 0.25 in the fourth year. The influence of teaching staff guidance remains relatively stable, fluctuating between 0.61 and 0.71, indicating that the impact of teachers' guidance on students across all year groups is relatively consistent. The influence of cultural identity on the willingness to carry on traditions peaks in the second year (0.77) and is lowest in the third year (0.67); fluctuations in the willingness of senior students may stem from the impact of employment pressures. A gender-based analysis reveals that female students respond significantly more strongly to faculty guidance (0.69) than male students (0.64), whilst the influence of curriculum design and cultural identity on the willingness to carry on traditions remains largely consistent across genders. A stratified analysis by university type indicates that students at comprehensive universities are most responsive to faculty guidance (0.74), whilst students at art academies demonstrate the strongest driving effect of cultural identity on the willingness to pass on traditions (0.74). The influence of cultural identity on the willingness to pass on traditions is weakest among students at teacher training universities (0.68), which may reflect the greater pressure regarding career choices faced by students at such institutions.

4.5 Results of the Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Five themes were identified from the qualitative interviews, revealing how the educational environment influences students' cultural identity and willingness to preserve their cultural heritage through multiple psychological mechanisms.

Theme 1: Moments of Aesthetic Epiphany

The most common factor was the triggering effect of the aesthetic environment, which emerged in 14 interviews (93%). A third-year student provided the most vivid description: 'I attended an exhibition of ancient landscape paintings organised by the college, and as I looked at the brushstrokes and the use of ink... I suddenly understood why my teacher had emphasised that brushwork must have force. Since then, I have consciously begun to copy the classics of the ancient masters myself.' However, the same exhibition had little impact on students with a low inclination to pursue the tradition: "Although the school organised us to view the exhibition, I didn't feel much. Perhaps my aesthetic standards aren't high enough." This disparity reflects that the effectiveness of an aesthetic environment depends on the student's own aesthetic foundation and receptiveness.

Theme 2: The Process of Identity Reconstruction

Interaction between teachers and students plays a crucial role in the negotiation of identity, a point emphasised in 12 of the interviews (80%). Students undergo a transformation of identity through dialogue with and emulation of their teachers. The experience of one postgraduate student is particularly telling: 'My tutor not only taught me techniques, but also frequently discussed with me our understanding of the masters of old. Gradually, I came to see myself as a true painter.' In contrast, students who lacked this depth of interaction displayed marked disengagement: "The teacher just taught us techniques. I couldn't sense how passionate the teacher was about this art form." This demonstrates that a teacher's personal enthusiasm and professional example are crucial to the formation of students' sense of identity.

Theme 3: The Tension Between Tradition and Modernity

The emergence of digital tools has triggered aesthetic anxiety among some students, as evidenced in 11 of the interviews (73%). Students with a strong desire to preserve tradition tend to weigh up the relationship between technology and tradition rationally: 'I've used an iPad to copy ancient paintings, but I eventually went back to pen and paper, because only genuine rice paper and a brush can produce brushstrokes with a sense of vitality.' Other students, however, questioned this attachment to traditional tools: 'Why must we insist on traditional brushes and ink? I think this is just the stubbornness of the older generation.' These contrasting viewpoints indicate that students are engaged in a profound process of choosing between aesthetic and technical approaches.

Theme 4: The Conflict Between Practical Pressures and Ideals

The most direct factor influencing the willingness to carry on the tradition is the practical difficulty of finding employment, which was discussed in 13 of the interviews (87%). One student with a low willingness to carry on the tradition admitted frankly: 'I actually love landscape painting, but my parents say there are no career prospects in this field.' In contrast, students who were determined to continue expressed a positive outlook: 'I've considered employment prospects too, but I've decided to believe in myself and this art form. I'm thinking about how to combine landscape painting with the needs of contemporary society.' This reflects that even when a sense of cultural identity has been established, practical pressures regarding employment can still alter the direction of career choices.

Theme 5: The Historical Legitimacy of Innovation

Ten of the interviews (67%) addressed the relationship between tradition and innovation. One postgraduate student's comment is particularly telling: 'At first, I thought innovation meant breaking with tradition. Later, my supervisor helped me understand that the ancients also innovated upon the foundations laid by their predecessors, so why shouldn't we innovate?' This suggests that once students have established an understanding of the historical legitimacy of innovation through theoretical study, they become more confident in their creative choices.

In summary, the qualitative data reveal the specific psychological mechanisms underlying the interactions between variables in the quantitative model. The formation of cultural identity involves a series of progressive stages, including aesthetic triggers and identity negotiation. It is worth noting that the suppressing effect of employment pressures on the willingness to preserve cultural heritage often stems from external practical difficulties.

5. Discussion

5.1 Mediating Mechanisms of Cultural Identity

This study confirms the significant mediating role of cultural identity between the educational environment and the willingness to preserve cultural heritage. Quantitative analysis indicates that the influence of the educational environment is primarily realised through the stimulation of students' cultural identity; this finding is consistent with Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour, which posits that the formation of attitudes requires the internalisation of behavioural beliefs. Feng, X. W. (2022) argues that the influence of the educational environment on cultural identity is a core manifestation of educational efficacy, whilst the strength of cultural identity directly determines students' willingness to practise their culture. Although curriculum design, teacher guidance and campus culture can all exert a direct influence on cultural identity, their indirect effects on the willingness to transmit cultural heritage are often stronger than their direct effects. This aligns with the findings of Zhao G.S. (2022) in his empirical study on the transmission and development of traditional crafts, and corroborates the recent findings of Jia, Y. X., & Tan, H. Y. (2023) regarding the promotional role of diverse teacher staffing in the formation of student identity.

Qualitative data further reveal the specific processes involved. The formation of cultural identity is not a linear accumulation, a phenomenon that can be explained by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. The aesthetic environment stimulates emotional resonance in students through ritualised experiences; building upon this emotional foundation, students internalise their identity into stable behaviour through innovative practice, which resonates with Biggs's (2001) theory regarding the interaction between the learning process and the school environment. Although senior students face severe employment pressures, those who have developed a strong sense of cultural identity maintain a high level of commitment to their discipline. This aligns with Stryker and Burke's (2000) findings regarding the role of identity strength in promoting behavioural persistence. Research by Li, D., & Wei, K. (2023) also indicates that when students possess a deep professional identity, their commitment to their discipline remains high even in the face of structural difficulties in securing employment within the arts.

5.2 The Pivotal Role of Teacher Guidance

Of the three educational factors, teacher guidance has the strongest influence on cultural identity, and also exerts the strongest indirect effect on the willingness to pass on cultural heritage through cultural identity. In his social learning theory, Bandura (1977) emphasised that, in observational learning, the status, authority and credibility of the model have a direct influence on imitative behaviour. Jia, Y. X., & Tan, H. Y. (2023) further confirmed that a diverse teaching staff significantly promotes the formation of student identity. Gender-stratified analysis revealed subtle differences in the effects of teacher guidance: female students responded significantly more strongly to teacher guidance than male students, which may stem from gender differences in perceptions of authority and imitative motivation. However, a diverse teaching staff can provide students with a richer selection of role models, which is consistent with Lv, J. Y. (2023)'s findings that diverse teacher-student interactions enhance student learning outcomes.

5.3 The Impact of Differences in the Educational Ecosystem

At the year-group level, the impact of the curriculum diminishes progressively, whilst the influence of teaching staff remains relatively stable; this is consistent with educational theories regarding the formative role of the school environment in student development. An analysis of university types reveals significant differences in educational outcomes across different institutions. Art colleges demonstrate a comparative advantage in transforming cultural identity into a willingness to preserve and pass on traditions, likely due to their artistic atmosphere, accumulated expertise among teaching staff, and peer recognition. Students at comprehensive universities demonstrate a relatively high sensitivity to faculty guidance, whilst those at teacher training universities face greater pressure regarding career choices. This resonates with Biggs's (2001) view on the formative role of the school teaching environment in student learning, and is also consistent with Entwistle's (2018) theory emphasising the influence of the learning environment on the depth of students' understanding.

5.4 Aesthetic Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital Age

Qualitative data frequently reveal conflicting attitudes towards digital tools. On the one hand, digital tools provide efficient learning support and the ability to analyse fine details; on the other hand, students worry that digital tools may erode the 'vitality' of traditional brushwork. Yang, S. Y (2024) points out that this dichotomy reflects the tension between the imagery sought in traditional literati painting and the precision of digital aesthetics. However, students with a strong desire to preserve tradition have, in practice, explored creative approaches that blend media, recognising that the issue lies not with the medium itself, but with the depth of the user's understanding of aesthetic principles. Livingstone (2004) emphasises in his research that the key lies in teaching students to rationally assess the

characteristics of different media, whilst ensuring that the final creative expression embodies the spirit of literati painting.

5.5 The Conflict Between Employment Difficulties and the Willingness to Carry on Cultural Traditions

Although senior students maintain a high level of cultural identity, their role in driving the willingness to pass on traditions has declined significantly; this phenomenon is consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) theory of self-determination. Xue, F., & Dong, Y (2022) further validated the negative correlation between employment pressure and professional commitment among senior students, whilst Li, D., & Wei, K (2023) demonstrated that employment challenges in the development of innovation and entrepreneurship education ecosystems for arts majors have become a significant factor constraining cultural transmission.

However, students with a willingness to transmit cultural heritage are already demonstrating a possibility; they are contemplating how to integrate landscape painting with the needs of contemporary society. Throsby's (2010) research in cultural economics and Zhang, Y.'s (2023) latest study both indicate that the integration of traditional arts with the cultural and creative industries is feasible. Feng, X. W.'s (2022) study on the current state of cultural confidence among university students in the new era further explores the implications of traditional art transmission for cultural confidence.

6. Conclusion and Implications

6.1 Key Findings

This study systematically investigates the mechanisms through which art education in Chinese universities influences students' willingness to carry on the tradition of literati landscape painting:

- 1) Cultural identity plays a significant mediating role between the educational environment and the willingness to carry on the tradition (addressing RQ2). SEM analysis reveals that the influence of educational environment factors on the willingness to carry on the tradition first alters students' cultural identity, and subsequently influences this willingness through the transformation of that identity. This academically validates that the true function of education lies not merely in the transmission of knowledge.
- 2) Faculty guidance is the strongest educational driving force (addressing RQ1). Among the three environmental factors, faculty guidance exerts the strongest influence on cultural identity and, through cultural identity, exerts the strongest driving force on the willingness to carry on the tradition. Gender-stratified analysis indicates that female students are more sensitive to faculty guidance, suggesting that education should strengthen the diversification of faculty composition.
- 3) The process of forming cultural identity is characterised by an emotional priority (addressing RQ3). Ritualised experiences within the aesthetic environment first evoke emotional resonance, which is then deepened cognitively through teacher-student interaction and curricular learning. This reveals that instructional design should prioritise the ritualistic nature of aesthetic enlightenment rather than mere knowledge transmission.
- 4) Senior-year students face a conflict between identity and reality (addressing RQ3). Analysis by year group shows that the influence of the curriculum diminishes with each year, whilst the role of faculty guidance remains stable; however, employment pressures significantly weaken the transformation of identity into a willingness to carry on the tradition. Nevertheless, a strong sense of cultural identity can mitigate this suppression to some extent, and a deep-rooted cultural identity cultivated through talent development can help students hold fast to their ideals when facing practical pressures.
- 5) Differences in the educational ecosystem significantly impact educational outcomes (addressing RQ1). There are marked disparities among universities in terms of the educational environment they foster and the resulting teaching outcomes. Art academies hold an advantage in facilitating the transformation of cultural identity into a willingness to carry on traditions, whilst students at teacher training universities face greater career pressures. Non-art academies can improve the environment for fostering cultural identity by optimising their educational settings and strengthening faculty development.

6.2 Teaching Recommendations

At the curricular level, we will strengthen the groundwork in cultural foundations. By introducing compulsory courses prior to the specialised landscape painting curriculum, students will establish a conceptual framework for understanding the spirit of the literati before learning technical skills. This will enable them to recognise that both the

innovations of ancient masters and the experiments of contemporary artists adhere to the same aesthetic principles, thereby aligning with the 'emotion-first' characteristic inherent in the formation of cultural identity.

At the campus culture level, optimise the environment for artistic immersion. Informal learning activities are crucial for stimulating students' aesthetic resonance, allowing them to subtly enhance their aesthetic taste and cultural identity within a daily artistic atmosphere.

At the faculty development level, establish a diverse teaching staff. A combination of teachers of different genders, generations and styles can provide students with a richer range of role models; in particular, the recruitment of female teachers should be prioritised. At the same time, teachers should be encouraged to share their personal creative journeys in the classroom, thereby enhancing the personal dimension of the learning experience.

In terms of career guidance, a phased, progressive programme should be designed. From the first to the second year, the focus is on aesthetic enlightenment and the shaping of cultural identity; from the second to the third year, the emphasis is on career exploration and industry awareness; and from the third to the fourth year, students are helped to understand the unity—rather than the opposition—between cultural heritage and employment.

6.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has the following limitations. Firstly, the geographical scope was limited to Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei; the situation in other regions of China remains to be explored. Secondly, the proportion of female participants in the quantitative sample was relatively high, which may have affected the representativeness of the analysis of gender differences. Thirdly, the behavioural tendencies sub-dimension of cultural identity was measured with only four items; although its reliability and validity indicators met conventional thresholds, a broader item pool would give this sub-dimension greater statistical stability, and future studies should consider expanding it. Finally, the measurement of the intention to pass on traditions was based on self-reported questionnaires, and there may be discrepancies with actual behaviour; future research should incorporate behavioural indicators.

Future research could be deepened in the following directions: establishing longitudinal tracking studies to observe the stability of students' willingness to pass on traditions and the translation of this into action; designing teaching intervention programmes centred on cultural identity to measure their causal effects on the willingness to pass on traditions; and applying this framework to other traditional art forms or cultural contexts to test the model's generalisability.

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