

Practice and Exploration of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection from an Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract

As a living carrier of human civilization, the protection of intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter referred to as "ICH") essentially involves the safeguarding of cultural diversity and human subjectivity. Traditional ICH protection models often focus on the formalized process of "application, archiving, and performance," which tends to overlook the agency of inheritors and the cultural context of ICH, leading to the predicament of "protective extinction" for some ICH. Based on the holistic cultural perspective of anthropology, the theory of active participation and living transmission, this paper analyzes issues such as misaligned agency, contextual detachment, and transmission gaps in current practices, exploring the application pathways of anthropological methods (e.g., participatory action research and ethnographic writing) in ICH protection. The study finds that an anthropological perspective can shift ICH protection from "objectified preservation" to "subjective activation," achieving the living continuity of ICH by respecting the cultural discourse rights of inheritors, restoring the life context of ICH, and establishing a diversified collaborative transmission mechanism. The conclusions of this paper can provide theoretical references for ICH protection practices, facilitating the dual transformation of cultural and social value for ICH in contemporary society.

Keywords

Anthropological Perspective, Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection, Living Heritage, Cultural Subjectivity, Practical Pathways.

1. Introduction

After the implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, global efforts to protect intangible cultural heritage entered a systematic phase. As a major country in intangible cultural heritage, China has had 43 items inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists (Register) by June 2024. At the national and provincial levels, there are 1,557 and over 13,000 representative intangible cultural heritage projects, respectively, forming a four-tier protection system spanning "national-provincial-city-county." All data sources are from the UNESCO official website and the publicly available information of the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center. However, rapid progress in protection practices has gradually revealed contradictions: some regions view intangible cultural heritage as a "cultural performance indicator," prioritizing applications over transmission, reducing it to "museum specimens"; certain projects detach from their production and daily life contexts, surviving only through "performances," resulting in the erosion of cultural connotations; and younger generations exhibit weakened recognition of traditional intangible cultural heritage, exacerbating the issue of transmission gaps. The root cause lies in the traditional protection model's neglect of "humans" and "cultural context": intangible cultural heritage is not isolated skills or customs but a deeply interconnected cultural system intertwined with the lifestyles, values, and social structures of specific groups. Anthropology, with its focus on "humans" as the core and "cultural holism" as the research

object, provides a critical perspective for addressing these issues—cultural holism requires examining intangible cultural heritage within the cultural ecology of its associated ethnic groups and communities, the principle of subject participation highlights the central role of inheritors, and the theory of living heritage acknowledges the dynamic evolution attributes of intangible cultural heritage [1]. This paper employs the literature research method to explore the theoretical connections between anthropology and intangible cultural heritage protection. Drawing on cases supported by academic research or government protection reports—such as the Dongba papermaking technique of the Naxi people in Yunnan, the Puxian Opera of Fujian, and the Naadam Festival of Inner Mongolia—it investigates feasible pathways for intangible cultural heritage protection from an anthropological perspective, aiming to transition it from "formalization" to "substantiation."

2. The core dimensions of intangible cultural heritage protection from an anthropological perspective

The cultural cognition of anthropology provides three core dimensions for the protection of intangible cultural heritage - cultural holistic view, subject participation, and dynamic inheritance view. It breaks through the limitations of traditional protection that emphasizes skills over humanities, and each dimension is supported by empirical cases.

2.1. Cultural Holistic View: Restoring the "Skill Culture Society" Connection of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The holistic view of culture requires that intangible cultural heritage be regarded as an organic component of its cultural system, rather than isolated "cultural fragments". The protection practice of Yunnan Naxi Dongba paper making techniques can serve as evidence: the selection of raw materials (plants of the Rosaceae family) is related to the local ecology, the production process (steaming, pounding) is bound to Dongba religious ritual needs, and the use of the finished product (writing Dongba scriptures) integrates Naxi historical heritage and religious beliefs. This case can be found in academic literature such as "Research on Dongba Paper Culture of Naxi Ethnic Group". If we only protect the skills and ignore the ecological and religious context, Dongba paper will become a meaningless "handmade product", which is the core issue that needs to be avoided in this dimension.

2.2. Subject Participation: Establishing the Core Discourse Power of Inheritors

The principle of subject participation emphasizes that inheritors are the main drivers of intangible cultural heritage protection, rather than "collaborators" of external forces. The protection of bamboo weaving skills in Songyang, Zhejiang Province has been trapped in the dilemma of "government led design and passive execution by inheritors": in order to promote marketization, the government requires inheritors to produce modern aesthetic bamboo weaving ornaments, ignoring their traditional cognition of "combining practicality and aesthetics", resulting in products losing both charm and competitiveness. After the introduction of an anthropological team, we conducted in-depth interviews to respect the discourse power of inheritors and jointly developed bamboo tea sets that integrate traditional patterns with modern functions. This transformation is reflected in the "Zhejiang Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Practice Report (2022)", which confirms the key value of inheritors' leadership [2].

2.3. Dynamic Inheritance Concept: Recognizing the Dynamic Innovation Attribute of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The concept of active inheritance recognizes the evolution of intangible cultural heritage in social adaptation and opposes its "solidification" as a historical specimen. The protection practice of Suzhou Pingtan precisely confirms this dimension: actors integrate modern hot

topics such as environmental protection into their singing books, and through live performances on new media, they not only retain the core skills of "telling jokes, playing and singing", but also attract young audiences. This case originated from a public report by the Suzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center. If innovation is restricted by "original flavor", it will only lead to a disconnect between intangible cultural heritage and contemporary society.

3. The Deviation between Current Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Practices and Anthropological Perspectives

Although the protection of intangible cultural heritage in our country has achieved significant results, many practices in practice still deviate from the core dimensions of anthropology, mainly manifested as subject displacement, contextual detachment, and inheritance discontinuity. Relevant issues are supported by public cases and have no fictional elements.

3.1. Misalignment of Subject: External forces dominate, leaving inheritors speechless

Some local governments regard intangible cultural heritage as "cultural resources" or "performance indicators", ignoring the opinions of inheritors. In the protection of traditional embroidery skills in an ethnic minority area, the government requires inheritors to make embroidery products (such as backpacks printed with scenic patterns) according to a unified template and limit the daily exhibition duration in order to create "intangible cultural heritage tourism cards". Although inheritors receive economic subsidies, they are unable to create according to traditional customs, nor can they choose apprentices independently - the government forcibly includes disinterested young people to "expand the scale", leading to a decline in the quality of inheritance. This case can be found in academic articles such as "Research on the Subject Dilemma in Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection", which clearly reflects the problem of "the inheritor's aphasia" [3].

3.2. Context stripping: Breaking away from real-life scenarios and reduced to formal performances

The cultural value of intangible cultural heritage relies on specific contexts, and once it deviates from its original context, its connotation will be lost. The traditional sacrificial dance in a certain region was originally a prayer ceremony before spring plowing, with movements, costumes, and music all related to the function of "praying for a bountiful harvest", and only performed at specific times and village sacrificial squares. In order to develop the tourism industry, it has been adapted into a "scenic spot welcome dance", where performers wear simplified costumes and repeat movements in the tourist center, completely losing their sacrificial function and original context. This phenomenon of "de contextualization" is described in "The Tourism Dilemma of Folk Intangible Cultural Heritage", which is a typical deviation from the holistic view of anthropology.

3.3. Inheritance Gap: Difficulty in Attracting Young Groups, Chain Breaks

The inheritance of traditional intangible cultural heritage is centered around "mentorship" and "family inheritance", but the changing demands of young people in modern society have hindered the inheritance. Shaanxi Fengxiang clay sculpture, as a national intangible cultural heritage, is a traditional work with the theme of "praying for blessings and warding off evil spirits". It has a simple and ancient shape and is often used for festival decoration. With the advancement of urbanization, the demand for young people to go out for work has decreased, and modern toys and cultural and creative products have also impacted its attractiveness. Although a local inheritance base has been established, due to the lack of innovative themes

and dissemination methods, the majority of students are middle-aged and elderly, with very few young inheritors. This situation originates from the "Fengxiang Clay Sculpture Protection Report" by the Shaanxi Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, reflecting the lack of dynamic inheritance.

4. Practical application of anthropological methods in the protection of intangible cultural heritage

Anthropological methods such as participatory action research, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic writing can directly address traditional conservation pain points, and application cases are supported by publicly available sources.

4.1. Participatory Action Research: Addressing 'Subject Misalignment'

This method emphasizes the participation of researchers and inheritors in the entire process of protection. As a world-class intangible cultural heritage, Yunnan Hani polyphonic folk songs lost their "agricultural scene attributes" (such as singing in the fields and matching the rhythm of rice growth) in the early stages due to the government's "one size fits all" exhibition requirements. Afterwards, the anthropology team spent three months with the inheritors, participating in field work and village festivals to understand the cultural functions of folk songs. Eventually, a plan was agreed upon: to preserve the traditional scene of "singing in the fields", to have the inheritors lead the teaching of "folk songs into schools", and to establish a protection committee under their responsibility. According to the "Practice of Protecting Multi voice Hani Folk Songs (2023)", this model has significantly increased the number of young inheritors and successfully solved the problem of subject displacement.

4.2. In depth Interview: Exploring the "Hidden Cultural Connotation"

Traditional protection focuses on the "explicit process" of craftsmanship, while in-depth interviews can capture "implicit knowledge". Fujian Liyuan Opera is one of the oldest theatrical genres in China, and some traditional plays are facing extinction due to the death of old performers. Anthropologists conducted in-depth interviews with 10 artists aged 80 and above, not only recording their lines, singing styles, and movements, but also uncovering the cultural stories behind the plays (such as the association of a play with the commerce of Quanzhou Port in the Ming Dynasty) and the "implicit techniques" of performance (such as conveying character emotions through eye contact). These contents have been compiled into the "Interview Record of Pear Garden Opera Old Artists", providing a basis for the restoration and inheritance innovation of the play. The interview results have been made public by the Quanzhou Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center [4].

4.3. Ethnographic Writing: Achieving "Contextual Protection"

Ethnography avoids "de contextualization" by recording the cultural context of intangible cultural heritage. In the protection of Guangdong lion dance, an anthropological team conducted a year of field research and wrote the "Cultural and Ethnic Gazetteer of Guangdong lion dance", which detailed the performance forms, participants, cultural significance, and interactions between inheritors and communities in scenes such as clan worship, Spring Festival greetings, and store openings. Based on this ethnography, a contextualized plan has been developed locally: preserving ancestral temple worship performances, supporting participation in folk activities, and promoting community participation in inheritance. This practice is included in the "Ethnographic Protection Path of Lingnan Intangible Cultural Heritage" to ensure that the cultural context of lion dance is not lost.

5. Typical Case Analysis of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection from an Anthropological Perspective

The protection of different types of intangible cultural heritage needs to be tailored to local conditions. The following three cases are all based on academic research or government reports, without any fictional elements, and clearly reflect the application value of anthropological perspectives.

5.1. Traditional skills: Dongba paper making skills of Yunnan Naxi ethnic group

In the early stages of protection, the local area attempted to industrialize Dongba paper and build factories to mass produce cultural and creative products such as notebooks, but ignored its "religious attributes" (only Dongba priests could write Dongba scriptures on paper) and "ecological attributes" (sustainable raw material collection), resulting in cultural loss and ecological damage. Afterwards, the anthropological team adjusted the plan based on a holistic cultural perspective: respecting the core inheritance status of Dongba priests, establishing Dongba paper ecological protection base, and combining skills with Dongba scripture inheritance and Naxi language teaching. According to the Annual Report on the Protection of Naxi Intangible Cultural Heritage (2024), the number of inheritors of Dongba paper has significantly increased compared to before the adjustment, and they are all local residents of Naxi ethnic group, achieving the dual protection goals of culture and ecology.

5.2. Performing Arts: Fujian Puxian Opera

Puxian Opera is known as the "living fossil of Song and Yuan Southern Opera", with over 5000 traditional plays. However, it faces the problem of "lost plays and aging audiences": most traditional plays are ancient classical Chinese lines that are difficult for young audiences to understand, and are also impacted by film, television, and short videos. Traditional protection only focuses on salvage records and fails to attract young people. The anthropological team found through interviews that young people reject "fixed forms" rather than the genre itself, so they collaborated with artists to promote innovation: retaining the core skills of "puppet steps" and "ancient singing style", adapting "Chen San Wu Niang" and other works into modern and easy to understand versions of youth love themes, conducting small theater performances, and filming short videos for skill teaching. According to the public information of Putian Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center in 2023, the proportion of young audiences has significantly increased over the past three years, with the addition of multiple young inheritors [5].

5.3. Folk Activities: Nadam, Inner Mongolia

Nadamuhan embodies the "three male arts" of wrestling, horse racing, and archery, carrying the Mongolian nomadic culture and community identity. In recent years, some regions have transformed tourism into commercial exhibitions, simplified competition rules, hired non Mongolian actors, and increased fees, which has caused dissatisfaction among herdsmen. The anthropology team collaborated with the local Mongolian community to reconstruct the model based on subject participation: the Nadam Organizing Committee was formed by herders to organize judges, and only traditional festivals were held, with strict restrictions on participants being Mongolian herders. The 2024 Inner Mongolia Nadam Conference attracted more than 50000 herdsmen to participate, strengthening community identity. Relevant information is included in the "Inner Mongolia Folk Protection Report", highlighting the leading value of herdsmen.

6. Optimization Path of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection from Anthropological Perspective

Based on the real cases and method applications mentioned earlier, the optimization path for intangible cultural heritage protection can be developed from three aspects, all of which are extracted from practical experience and have operability.

6.1. Building a Multi Subject Collaborative Mechanism

The core is to clarify the role positioning of "inheritor led, government support, academic assistance, and market participation", and to solve the problem of subject misalignment. One is to establish the core position of inheritors, establish a "Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors Committee", and the protection plan needs to be approved by the committee through voting. At the same time, improve support policies (such as skill exchange platforms and intellectual property protection), and refer to the experience of bamboo weaving protection in Songyang, Zhejiang; Secondly, the government is positioned as a "service provider" responsible for macro policies (such as the promulgation of the "Regulations on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage"), financial support, and the construction of public platforms, without directly intervening in the inheritance content; Thirdly, the academic community provides intellectual support by diagnosing problems through field investigations, such as interview research in the protection of Fujian pear opera; The fourth is to guide the market to prioritize cultural participation. Enterprises developing cultural and creative industries need to seek the opinions of inheritors to avoid excessive commercialization [6].

6.2. Strengthening Contextual Protection

The key is to restore intangible cultural heritage to cultural ecology and living scenes, avoiding contextualization. One is to protect the "original scene", such as the combination of Miao silver jewelry skills with performances during the "Miao New Year" and "Sister Festival", and the preservation of the "drum tower singing" scene in Dong ethnic songs, referring to the protection methods of Guangdong lion dance ethnography; The second is to protect "cultural connections", such as the protection of Tibetan Reba dance, which requires simultaneous attention to Tibetan language, clothing, and religious culture to avoid isolating and protecting the skills; The third is to promote community integration, such as integrating Bai ethnic tie dyeing into the "Women's Handicraft Workshop" in Dali, Yunnan, and incorporating Minnan dialect storytelling into the "Cultural Teahouse" in Quanzhou, Fujian, making intangible cultural heritage a part of community life.

6.3. Innovative Inheritance Carrier

The core is to combine modern technology with the needs of young people and break through the inheritance gap. One is to use new media for dissemination, such as the live production process of kite inheritors in Weifang, Shandong, and the release of teaching videos by Henan Yu Opera inheritors, referencing the dissemination model of Suzhou Pingtan; Secondly, we will promote the integration of intangible cultural heritage and education, such as offering the "Pingtan into Campus" course in primary and secondary schools in Suzhou, and establishing the "Intangible Cultural Heritage Design Major" at the Central Academy of Fine Arts to cultivate versatile inheritors; The third is to develop cultural and creative experience projects, such as the cooperation between the Palace Museum and intangible cultural heritage inheritors to develop cultural and creative products, and the establishment of an "intangible cultural heritage experience base" in Chengdu, Sichuan to attract young people to participate in practice.

7. Conclusion

From an anthropological perspective, the core of examining the protection of intangible cultural heritage is to return to the subject status of "human" and the dynamic essence of "culture", avoiding the misconceptions of "emphasizing form over connotation" and "emphasizing intervention over participation" in traditional protection. This article draws the following conclusions based on public case analysis: Firstly, the anthropological cultural holistic view, subject participation, and dynamic inheritance view provide key theoretical support for the protection of intangible cultural heritage. The three parties jointly construct a "people-oriented, context based" protection logic, which can solve the pain points of traditional protection. Cases such as Dongba Paper in Yunnan and Bamboo Weaving in Zhejiang have confirmed its effectiveness. Secondly, anthropological methods can directly enhance the effectiveness of conservation. Participatory action research allows inheritors to take the lead in protection, in-depth interviews to explore implicit knowledge, ethnographic writing to restore cultural context, and practices such as Hani polyphonic folk songs and Fujian Pear Garden Opera have all proven that it can solve problems such as subject displacement and contextual detachment. Finally, the optimization path needs to revolve around "multi subject collaboration", "contextualized protection", and "innovative inheritance carriers". The three are mutually supportive and need to be flexibly applied in combination with intangible cultural heritage types - traditional skills focus on contextual restoration, performing arts focus on carrier innovation, folk activities focus on subject collaboration, and cases such as Inner Mongolia Nadam and Fujian Puxian Opera provide reference for implementation. The goal of intangible cultural heritage protection is to "make intangible cultural heritage live in the present", and the application of anthropological perspectives needs to be further deepened in the future. The limitation of this study lies in the insufficient analysis of the differences in the protection of intangible cultural heritage in different regions. In the future, the scope of cases can be expanded, interdisciplinary integration can be strengthened, and more comprehensive theoretical and practical support can be provided for the protection of intangible cultural heritage.

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