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Inheritance Strategies for the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Ethnic Minorities: A Case Study of Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance in Huaiji

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Abstract From the perspective of cultural ecological protection areas, this study examines the protection and inheritance pathways of intangible cultural heritage among ethnic minorities. Using the Spring Cattle Dance of Xiashuai Zhuang and Yao Ethnic Township in Huaiji County as a case study, it systematically analyzes the cultural connotation, current status of protection and inheritance, protection models, and inheritance pathways associated with the Spring Cattle Dance. Furthermore, the study figures out the challenges of the protection and inheritance of ethnic minority intangible cultural heritage resources, investigates the underlying causes of these challenges, and proposes targeted, feasible solutions, thereby contributing to the protection of intangible cultural heritage in Zhaoqing.

Keywords Intangible cultural heritage, Spring Cattle Dance, Inheritance strategy

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Intangible cultural heritage is the essence of local folk culture, serving as a witness to regional cultural and socio-historical transformations, while embodying the cultural genes and ethnic memories of various regions. Amid the rapid advancement of China's social economy, the protection and inheritance of the nation's intangible cultural heritage face both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges. Zhaoqing, recognized as a prominent historical and cultural city in China, boasts a long-standing history and abundant intangible cultural heritage resources. Xiashuai in Huaiji County is an autonomous township inhabited by the Zhuang and Yao ethnic groups, located in the northwest region of Zhaoqing. It lies at the intersection of Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan, and other provinces (autonomous regions), forming part of the Nanling ethnic corridor. Historically, this area served as a frontier zone facilitating the integration of diverse ethnic groups. Over an extended historical period, it has developed traditional cultural resources characterized by distinct ethnic features, with the Spring Cattle Dance serving as a prominent example. The Spring Cattle Dance is an intangible cultural heritage deeply embedded in the production and daily life of ethnic minority communities in the Zhaoqing region. It exhibits distinct ethnic characteristics and is preserved within a generally favorable cultural environment, thereby possessing considerable protective value and developmental potential. Using the Spring Cattle Dance as a case study, research on the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage resources among ethnic minorities contributes to advancing the systematic protection of the Spring Cattle Dance from both theoretical and practical perspectives, and holds substantial academic and practical significance. Research on the Spring Cattle Dance within the academic community has addressed its origins[1-2], social functions[3-4], and protection efforts[5]. This article focuses on the challenges associated with the protection of the Spring Cattle Dance and examines comprehensive pathways for its protection and inheritance.

The Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance is a traditional local dance originating from Huaiji County, Zhaoqing City, Guangdong Province. It is primarily performed annually between the Spring Festival and the Lantern Festival, a period characterized by reduced agricultural activity for farmers. The timing of the performance often coincides with the Start of Spring, symbolizing an alignment with natural cycles and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. From a cultural perspective, the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance possesses a long-standing heritage that reflects the cultural practice of venerating farm cattle within agricultural societies. Fundamentally, this dance represents a cultural expression of agricultural civilization.

1 Current inheritance status of the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance

1.1 Family bloodline inheritance

Family inheritance, also known as bloodline inheritance, refers to the passing down of traditions across generations. The family serves as the most fundamental unit of inheritance, and bloodline inheritance within a family carries significant educational value. Those who inherit the Spring Cattle Dance through family ties have been immersed in its cultural environment from a young age. Compared to other inheritors, they develop an earlier and deeper understanding of the dance's singing style and techniques. Currently, the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance is primarily preserved and passed down within families. The present inheritor, Ma Jianye, is the fifth generation of the Ma family to carry on the "Spring Cattle Dance".

1.2 Master–apprentice inheritance

Master-apprentice inheritance is a common method for passing down the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance. In this process, the master selects one or more apprentices to impart skills and cultural knowledge, primarily through oral instruction and leading by example. This approach ensures that what is passed on encompasses not only technical skills but also the spirit and essence of the dance. Master-apprentice inheritance is one of the fundamental ways to preserve the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance. However, in reality, the enthusiasm among young people in Xiashuai Township for inheriting the Spring Cattle Dance is low, making it difficult to find suitable successors. Even when a promising apprentice is identified, family opposition often leads to abandonment. For instance, a young man favored by Ma Jianye ultimately did not continue due to his family's disapproval.

1.3 Social inheritance

Social inheritance occurs throughout the entire society and encompasses a wide range of channels and methods. It plays an increasingly

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significant role in preserving intangible cultural heritage today. In Xiashuai Township, campus-based inheritance serves as the primary means of social inheritance. The inheritors of the Spring Cattle Dance teach this traditional dance in ethnic schools, helping students acquire fundamental skills and broadening the reach of intangible cultural heritage preservation. The Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance Team regularly provides training to students enrolled in ethnic minority cultural heritage classes. During major ethnic festivals and events, the Spring Cattle Dance inheritors are often invited to perform on stage. In 2021, the Spring Cattle Dance performance "Zhuang Niu Xi Chun Niu", adapted by Huaiji Middle School, won first prize at the seventh Art Exhibition for primary and middle school students in Zhaoqing City. Through learning the Spring Cattle Dance, students not only deepen their appreciation for the cultural spirit of ethnic regions but also develop a greater interest in the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. They also enhance their artistic and physical skills. Most importantly, they gain hands-on experience with the dance's movements, establishing a direct connection with the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic communities.

2 Inheritance challenge of the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance

2.1 Insufficient financial support

The inheritance and protection of intangible cultural heritage is a long-term and complex task that involves high costs and slow returns. Although the Zhaoqing Municipal Government places great importance on safeguarding the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance, the material support it provides for its preservation remains inadequate. According to the Xiashuai government, Ma Jianye, a provincial-level inheritor of this intangible cultural heritage, receives an annual financial subsidy of 20,000 yuan. However, this amount is clearly insufficient to cover the living expenses of the master fully responsible for passing down the Spring Cattle Dance throughout the year, let alone the costs associated with purchasing and maintaining the dance's props. Furthermore, funding for the daily protection of intangible cultural heritage, including efforts in towns and townships as well as transmission and learning activities, is often limited and relies on a single source, resulting in insufficient financial support. Apart from relying on government financial support, there are no other funding sources, and the financial aid provided falls short of meeting the actual needs for the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. Many participants in the Spring Cattle Dance face difficult living conditions and can only train during the farming off-season. Consequently, the inheritors cannot rely solely on performing the Spring Cattle Dance for income and must take on other jobs to make a living. This reduces the time available for training and diminishes their focus. These challenging circumstances have caused many young people to hesitate in taking up the responsibility of inheriting the Spring Cattle Dance.

2.2 Monotonous promotion methods

The Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance is primarily popular in the Xiashuai Zhuang and Yao Ethnic Township of Huaiji County, Zhaoqing City, and its surrounding villages. This region, located in western Guangdong, is relatively underdeveloped. Due to various constraints such as economy, transportation, and technology, the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance has struggled to gain national recognition. Within Xiashuai Township, some residents still misunderstand the true meaning of the Spring Cattle Dance. They associate the cattle with negative traits like ugliness, stubbornness, and a hot temper. As a result, they believe that promoting the Spring Cattle Dance would damage the township's image and therefore oppose its preservation. The primary cause of this misunderstanding is the overly monotonous methods used to promote the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance. According to the staff at the Xiashuai Township Cultural Station, the Spring Cattle Dance is primarily promoted and reported through the official and private public accounts of the Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, as well as at the municipal and county levels. However, Xiashuai Township has not established a dedicated public account specifically for promoting intangible cultural heritage. As a result, the channels through which the public can access information about its intangible cultural heritage are limited, and the available introductions are neither comprehensive nor detailed enough. When searching for information about the Spring Cattle Dance online, one often encounters repetitive content, limited quantity, and inconsistent quality. Therefore, the methods of publicity and educational outreach need to be further innovated and improved. According to the inheritor Ma Jianye, during the performance, most of the audience recognize that the Spring Cattle Dance is being performed, but they do not understand its true meaning. In other words, they know that a cattle is being danced, but they lack insight into the content and spirit the performance aims to convey. This highlights the need to improve the promotion and explanation of the Spring Cattle Dance's spirit. Without a clear explanation of its connotation, the publicity of this intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities remains superficial.

2.3 High learning difficulty

The Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance, recognized as an intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities, is primarily performed in the Zhuang and Yao languages. Learners must master and apply these languages to participate. Most teaching follows a master-apprentice model, relying on oral instruction and personal demonstration, which makes it challenging to develop a systematic teaching method or achieve a high level of comprehension quickly. Besides, learning the dance movements is quite difficult and requires long-term practice, making rapid progress unlikely. The Spring Cattle Dance is a group performance; according to inheritor Ma Jianye, the traditional dance involves 20 performers. Zhuang girls stand on one side, Yao girls on the other, while three people dance as the cattle and three others play gongs and drums in the center, totaling 26 participants. Given the need to master the language and commit to extensive practice, it is rare for individuals to persist, making it especially difficult to assemble a complete performance team.

2.4 Lack of momentum in building the inheritance team

With the advancement of urbanization, many young and middle-aged individuals from rural areas have moved to cities for work, while elderly artisans are aging without successors to carry on intangible cultural heritage. In the case of the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance, the current inheritor, Ma Jianye, who is 75 years old, still performs the "driving cattle" role on stage. He expressed, "I truly want to find a successor, but nowadays, young people only watch the performances occasionally and are unwilling to take it up." Ma Jianye had hoped that some village youth would continue the tradition, but family opposition prevented this from happening. His son, Ma Jiedao, now over 40, works away from home to support the family financially. Ma Jianye hopes that his son will eventually return to their hometown and inherit the art of the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance. In addition to the traditional mode of master-apprentice inheritance, Ma Jianye and his partner visit the local primary school every Wednesday afternoon to provide lessons, aiming to instill an awareness of intangible cultural heritage inheritance in the students. However, their instruction occurs only

once a week at the township primary school, resulting in limited teaching time and insufficient practical engagement. The activities primarily involve visits, with inadequate experiential and participatory components to effectively deepen students' understanding of the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. Moreover, students face challenges in balancing academic responsibilities with technical learning, and children are not yet capable of immediately assuming the role of inheritors. Consequently, this approach offers only a superficial and basic comprehension, which is insufficient to address the issue of succession among inheritors.

3 Inheritance strategy of the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance

Intangible cultural heritage possesses dual characteristics. Firstly, it holds historical significance as the collective memory of ancestors who inhabited a particular region, reflecting the cultural foundations of a nation. Secondly, it remains vibrant in the present, embodying the national spirit within the contemporary context. Furthermore, intangible cultural heritage continuously enriches its cultural meaning in tandem with societal development, demonstrating an ability to evolve with the times. These dual attributes establish intangible cultural heritage as a living culture. To preserve its cultural connotation, it is imperative to engage in active, living inheritance. Such inheritance requires adherence to a holistic approach that is people-centered, object-based, and life-integrated, while embracing ongoing change and development in response to contemporary circumstances. Based on this, this approach is essential for the authentic protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritages of ethnic minorities, such as the Spring Cattle Dance, and for promoting the comprehensive development of intangible cultural heritage within these communities.

3.1 People–centered

The inheritance of intangible cultural heritage among ethnic minorities should adhere to a people-centered principle. The inheritors of intangible cultural heritage are a critical factor in its protection. Effective inheritance depends on empowering these inheritors to both maintain traditional practices and foster innovation. In Xiashuai Township, the primary modes of inheritance include family bloodline inheritance, master-apprentice inheritance and social inheritance, with family inheritance playing a predominant role in the protection of the Spring Cattle Dance. Ma Jianye, the current custodian of the Spring Cattle Dance, is the fifth generation of the Ma family to uphold this tradition and serves as its principal inheritor. Nonetheless, reliance solely on family inheritance is insufficient. The roles of family and social inheritance beyond master-apprentice inheritance are equally vital. Engaging public participation in safeguarding efforts and fostering a collective cultural identity are essential to ensuring the sustainable inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

In the inheritance of the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance, several challenges arise, including the high difficulty of learning the dance and the lack of momentum in building the inheritance team. The learning difficulties pertain not only to the dance itself but also to the associated language. Addressing these issues fundamentally depends on the people involved. The key lies in how the inheritors can develop more effective language teaching methods to help individuals whose native language is not Zhuang quickly acquire the basic Zhuang language skills necessary for performance. Additionally, creating a more systematic and efficient dance teaching approach is essential to enable those without a dance background to keep pace with the performance rhythm of the Spring Cattle Dance. This is the core challenge in learning the dance. In terms of building the inheritance team, it is crucial to make the performance content and form of the Spring Cattle Dance more engaging and appealing to a broader audience, encouraging more people to inherit the dance. To achieve this, government officials and current inheritors must make significant efforts to maximize resource utilization within the constraints of limited materials and explore efficient, effective training methods. For inheritors of intangible cultural heritage from ethnic minorities, it is essential to provide not only material support but also spiritual encouragement. This support helps them recognize the value of the culture they are preserving, fostering a strong commitment to its continuation.

3.2 Object–based

The props utilized in the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance are limited in number, but each holds significant importance. A comprehensive performance of the Spring Cattle Dance necessitates a stage, musical accompaniment, choreography, and skilled performers. The principal musical instruments employed include the small Jing drum, small Jing cymbals, and small Jing gong. Performance props encompass the costumes worn by the dancers as well as other related items. These props substantially embody the cultural characteristics of the ethnic groups performing the dance and serve as essential elements in the protection of intangible cultural heritage. They are not merely physical objects but also vital representations of the enduring cultural identity of these communities. At present, the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage among ethnic minorities encounters challenges such as inadequate funding, limited promotional strategies, and underdeveloped local cultural industries.

The protection of the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities should adopt a more object-based approach, with the establishment of relevant platforms and the attraction of increased social funding for investment. In this context, efforts should be directed toward the development and enhancement of the cultural industry. Firstly, museums and exhibition halls dedicated to ethnic cultural artifacts and their historical contexts can be established, thereby expanding avenues for cultural promotion and enabling a broader audience to appreciate the charm of intangible cultural heritage. Secondly, a range of cultural and creative products can be developed in conjunction with the local intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. This approach not only facilitates the individual promotion of the Spring Cattle Dance culture, integrating it more closely into everyday life, but also allows for connections with the intangible cultural heritage of other local ethnic minorities, thereby increasing overall attention to the protection of intangible cultural heritage in Xiashuai. Furthermore, relevant personnel should leverage modern technology to document and record the Spring Cattle Dance, disseminating this dance through appropriate platforms. This strategy will provide greater opportunities for individuals unfamiliar with or interested in the Spring Cattle Dance to engage with and gain a deeper understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities.

3.3 Life–integrated

The formation of the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance embodies the farmers' aspirations for favorable weather and their reverence for agricultural nature within the agricultural life of Xiashuai. The fundamental approach to safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities involves its integration into the everyday lives of local communities, thereby embedding it within contemporary ethnic practices. Such integration not only facilitates cultural inheritance but also strengthens the collective sense of identity and belonging

associated with intangible cultural heritage. Accordingly, the reintegration of ethnic minority intangible cultural heritages, exemplified by the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance, into the core of daily life, rendering their inheritance within everyday contexts more vibrant, is essential for their sustained continuation and inheritance.

The government holds an authoritative position and plays a pivotal role in the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. By formulating and refining relevant laws and regulations, it provides legal guarantees and policy support for the protection and inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities, ensuring that such efforts are conducted in accordance with the law and grounded in robust evidence. Meantime, through measures such as governmental financial assistance and tax incentives, enterprises and social organizations are encouraged to participate in the safeguarding of the Spring Cattle Dance, thereby linking the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities with contemporary enterprises and facilitating its gradual integration into modern life. In this process of integration, it is essential to reconstruct the relationship between the Spring Cattle Dance and social production and daily life, extract its symbolic elements, incorporate these into modern art and design, and develop practical intangible cultural heritage products that address the actual needs of people. This approach serves to bridge the gap between modern society and intangible cultural heritage in everyday life.

As a grassroots cultural front, the community plays an essential role in the protection and inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. Individuals collectively form communities, which subsequently constitute larger social groups. Integrating ethnic minority cultural practices, such as the Spring Cattle Dance, into community life, alongside the regular organization of cultural workshops and intangible cultural heritage exhibitions, can strengthen residents' cultural identity and engagement. This process fosters a spiritual cohesion that unites the group. Moreover, folk festivals serve not only as occasions for celebration but also as expressions of cultural recognition within social groups. Thus, intangible cultural heritage and folk festivals are mutually reinforcing. Folk festivals provide a valuable platform for the exhibition of intangible cultural heritage among ethnic minorities, exemplified by the Spring Cattle Dance. This dance not only contributes to the cultural ambiance of festivals but also functions as a significant medium for preserving ethnic memories and effectively conveying folk narratives. In the educational context, intangible cultural heritage is intimately connected to humanistic history. Local schools have the opportunity to integrate the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities into their curricula, thereby emphasizing its unique cultural significance through specialized courses. The incorporation of the Spring Cattle Dance into local cultural education allows students to develop a more profound understanding of this tradition. When combined with community performances and festival presentations of the Spring Cattle Dance, this approach bridges theoretical knowledge with lived experience, thereby enhancing students' sense of belonging and cultural identity.

4 Conclusions

The Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance is a representative of the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. This folk dance employs the Zhuang and Yao languages as mediums of expression and embodies a profound agricultural cultural heritage. As a vital component of the ethnic minority culture in Xiashui Township, the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance originated from the cattle worship practices of the Xiashui ancestors within their living environment. Through historical transformations and cultural evolution, it has developed into a physical activity through which people celebrate the harvest and express aspirations for a better and more prosperous life. The dance serves as an external manifestation of the community's reverence for cattle and respect for nature in the Xiashui region. The Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance is primarily preserved in Tianxin Village, Xiashuai Township, with the Ma Jianye family in Xiashuai recognized as the principal custodians. Currently, the main ways of inheritance include family bloodline inheritance, master-apprentice inheritance and social inheritance. The principal pathways of inheritance include performing the Spring Cattle Dance during New Year greetings within households during the Spring Festival, as well as government-supported off-stage performances. In recent years, efforts to disseminate the culture of the Spring Cattle Dance have expanded to include incorporation into primary and secondary school campuses.

The Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance serves as a representative example of the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities in Zhaoqing and offers a valuable pathway for the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritages among other ethnic groups. This dance is a significant element of the cultural identity of Xiashuai Ethnic Township. The unique humanistic environment of Xiashuai Township has fostered the emergence of the Spring Cattle Dance. Through continuous inheritance and innovation in the contemporary era, the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance has enriched the distinctive ethnic and agricultural cultures of the region, reflecting the Xiashuai people's reverence for nature and becoming an integral component of the township's historical and cultural development. In the context of rapid societal change, the inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage among ethnic minorities face both opportunities and challenges. Effective protection and inheritance of such heritage, exemplified by the Xiashuai Spring Cattle Dance, necessitate collaborative efforts across multiple sectors to establish a developmental and preservation pathway aligned with contemporary realities. Culture does not exist in isolation; only by embedding the intangible cultural heritage of ethnic minorities into everyday life and strengthening cultural identity can the dynamic continuity and sustainable development of these heritages be ensured, thereby fully realizing the unique value of ethnic cultures.

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