

A Study on the Challenges and Innovations in the Inheritance of Beihai Danjia Culture 2000 To the Present

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the challenges and innovative practices in cultural inheritance within the Beihai Danjia community from 2000 to the present day. As a unique local culture in Beihai, Guangxi, the Danjia people possess distinctive cultural customs. A range of distinctive cultural forms with ethnic characteristics have emerged, including Danjia Saltwater songs, Danjia wedding rituals, Danjia costumes, and Danjia traditional festivals and so on. This study incorporates qualitative research methodologies, which include interview and observation. The interview informants include 2 key informants, 2 casual informants, and 1 general informant. This interview focuses on the development issues of the Danjia family culture, covering challenges under policy inheritance, daily problems, and new forms of innovation. Moreover, By observation, ensure the authenticity of the research information. This study indicates that external socio-economic changes have disrupted the traditional inheritance model, causing many difficulties for the Danjia family culture in its development process in Beihai. This research has identified the challenges faced by the Danjia culture during its development after 2000: the loss of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers, the break in intergenerational inheritance, and the aging of the inheritors. The impact of commercialization of tourism on the authenticity of the culture, and some measures to address these challenges have also been summarized. This study is helpful in understanding the current situation of contemporary Chinese ethnic minority cultures and provides a reference for formulating targeted cultural protection strategies.

Keywords: Beihai Danjia; cultural inheritance; challenges; innovation; new century



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INTRODUCTION

The Danjia (蜑家) people are a unique water-based ethnic group along the coastal areas of China's South China Sea. The Danjia community in Beihai is mainly distributed in Dijiao, (地角) Qiaogang Town (桥港镇), Waisha Island (外沙岛) and the surrounding sea areas of Beihai City, Guangxi. (Zhou, S. L., & Li, Y. H. (2018). I am a Danjia person. Wenshi Chunqiu (Cultural and Historical Annals), (08), 29-34.) They have a long history and distinct cultural characteristics. Their culture, shaped by close ties with the ocean, encompasses unique elements such as salty water songs, Danjia boat houses, and marine folk culture, holding significant value in anthropological and cultural research.

Since the 21st century, China's rapid urbanization and economic transformation have exerted a profound

impact on traditional community cultures. As a key coastal city, Beihai has witnessed booming tourism, industrial development, and intensified population mobility, which have drastically changed the living environment and lifestyle of the Danjia people. (Wu, X. M. (2014). On the changes and choices of livelihoods of contemporary Danjia in Beihai: A case study of three recent feature films shot by CCTV. Journal of Yulin Normal University, (01), 8-12. <https://doi.org/10.13792/j.cnki.cn45-1300/z.2014.01.003>) Moreover, the younger generation of Danjia people has integrated into land-based life and increasingly tends to work away from home, leading to significant changes in cultural identity and inheritance models, accompanied by substantial challenges.

Firstly, the loss of traditional living spaces (such as the decline of fishing villages and the reduced use of

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wooden boats) has weakened the "survival context" for cultural practices. (Huang, J., Liang, L., & Geng, Y. (2018). The contemporary social living space of Danjia culture in the Beibu Gulf. *Journal of Guangxi Institute of Socialism*, (06), 93-98.) Secondly, there is a breakdown in intergenerational inheritance: elderly inheritors are aging, while young people, due to economic pressures and the influence of modern culture, have diminished interest in learning traditional skills. Thirdly, tourism commercialization has caused some cultural elements to be simplified or distorted to cater to tourists, threatening the authenticity of the culture (Wu, Y., Ma, S. W., Li, N., & Liao, L. H. (2013). A study on the living situation of Beihai Danjia "Salty Water Songs" under mass media. *Journal of Hezhou University*, (01), 57-60.) .

Since the 21st century, driven by cultural protection and the market, the Danjia culture has shown a trend of revival. However, its core driving force comes from policy protection, the development of tourism, and the awakening of identity consciousness. Therefore, the Beihai government and the descendants of the Danjia in Beihai, in combination with the social environment and policy orientation of Beihai, in order to better protect and inherit the Danjia culture, the Beihai government has successively introduced a series of protection policies for intangible cultural heritage and regional characteristic culture, including Danjia culture, and included it in the key protection category. From financial support to talent cultivation, they provide all-round protection for the inheritance of Danjia culture.(Chen, L. X. (2020). A study on the development of Beihai Danjia folk culture tourism. *Time-honored Brand Marketing*, (04), 1-2.)

Based on the important viewpoint of Aleida Assmann, a contributor to the theory of cultural memory: The dynamism of memory is related to the "memory crisis" and "memory reconstruction" in contemporary extended modern society. (Assmann, A. (2011). *Cultural memory and Western civilization: Functions, media, archives*. Cambridge University Press.) ,The development history of the Danjia culture in Beihai City demonstrates the viewpoint that cultural memory relies on carriers for transmission and evolves dynamically in response to the environment. Initially, the Danjia community used settlement areas such as Dijiao, Qiao Gang Town, and Danjia boat houses as physical spaces, as well as saltwater songs and marine folk customs as non-material practices as memory carriers, thereby constructing a cultural memory rooted in the ocean and an ethnic identity recognition. However, since the 21st century, urbanization has led to the disappearance of traditional spaces, the disruption of intergenerational transmission, and the distortion of cultural memory caused by tourism commercialization, which have

undermined the memory carriers and the transmission chain, causing the Danjia culture to fall into a memory crisis. The Beihai government has included the Danjia culture in key protection as an intangible heritage, providing funds and talent support. The Danjia community has also taken actions to awaken their identity recognition by restoring the carriers and reconstructing the transmission chain. This has promoted the transformation of the Danjia cultural memory from crisis to reconstruction. This process also indicates that the dynamic inheritance of cultural memory requires external policy guarantees and internal group practices, and realizes continuous continuation through interaction with the real environment.

Objectives

1. To investigate the major challenges confronted by the cultural inheritance of the Beihai Danjia community in the new century.
2. To explore the innovative practices in response to these challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts qualitative research methods to explore the complexity of cultural inheritance in the Danjia community.

The research employs interviews and observation as its research tools. Five people were interviewed, including Yuan Xuewu (袁学武) (inheritor of the Danjia Waisa Longmu Temple Fair), Shen Hongjie (沈鸿杰) (inheritor of Beihai Danjia Salty Water Songs), Zhong Qi (钟琪) (engaged in housing provident fund management in Beihai), Xu Hengyan (许恒燕) (from the Beihai Municipal Committee of the China Democratic League), and Liu Pengliang (刘鹏亮) (a college teacher working in Beihai). The interview questions also focused on issues such as the challenges encountered in the development of Beihai Danjia culture since 2000 and the measures taken for the development of Danjia culture.

The research interviews were conducted based on the theory of cultural memory, and combined with the perspective of Aleida Assmann on culture: cultural memory needs to be conveyed through material (such as the clothing of Danjia people) and non-material (such as the saltwater songs, wedding customs) carriers, and its transmission status is closely related to the memory crisis and memory reconstruction.

It conducts interviews with inheritors of Danjia culture and practitioners who have made contributions to Danjia cultural inheritance, seeking insights into the dilemmas and challenges in the inheritance of specific cultural elements such as Danjia salty water songs,

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Danjia wedding customs, and Danjia costumes. The aim is to summarize and sort out the challenges encountered in the inheritance of Danjia culture, And by integrating the core viewpoints of Participatory Culture Theory and living inheritance theory, an appropriate innovation can be found.

RESEARCH RESULT

The challenges in the inheritance of Beihai Danjia culture

Through interviews with inheritors of Danjia culture (such as Yuan Xuewu) and practitioners, combined with observations, the study identified three core challenges faced in the inheritance of Danjia culture. It encompasses the following three aspects: the loss of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers, the disruption of intergenerational transmission, the aging of the inheritors, and the impact of tourism commercialization on the authenticity of the culture.

The loss of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers Since the 21st century, with the acceleration of urbanization and the modernization transformation of the fishing industry, the traditional living space of the Beihai Danjia families has been continuously shrinking. Islands like Waisha Island and Qiaogang Town, due to the development and construction of urban tourism, their original settlement patterns have been completely disrupted. Especially, Qiaogang Town has become a tourist attraction in Beihai featuring the beauty of Danjia families' cuisine and handicrafts.



(Qiaogang Cultural Street in Beihai City - Photographed Image)

(Image Source: Online photography images)

Most of the houses where Danjia families once lived have been completely demolished and rebuilt. The number of traditional wooden Danjia family fishing boats has significantly decreased, and the usage frequency of wooden fishing boats for fishing production has also dropped significantly. (Huang, J., Liang, L., & Geng, Y. (2018). The contemporary social living space of Danjia culture in the Beibu Gulf. *Journal of Guangxi Institute of Socialism*, (06), 93-98.)

From the perspective of Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory, the transmission of Danjia's cultural memory is highly dependent on both material and non-

material carriers. However, the disappearance of the aforementioned traditional living spaces and tools is directly impacting the survival of these carriers. The cultural carriers related to life on water have also vanished: the spaces within Dong houses where memory was stored, such as displaying fishing tools, gradually disappeared; with the widespread use of mechanized fishing equipment, traditional skills like net weaving and fishing boat construction lost their practical application scenarios; and the changes in living spaces made it difficult to reproduce the scenes of impromptu singing of salty water songs. Now, such scenes can only be seen on major festivals and official events. The rupture of these carriers precisely confirms the viewpoint in the theory that "the absence of carriers can easily trigger a crisis of cultural memory", ultimately leading to the serious damage of the "survival environment" on which the Dong ethnic group's cultural practice relies.

Breakdown of intergenerational inheritance and aging of inheritors

Among the elderly in the Danjia family gathering areas in Behai, there are fewer and fewer people who have a thorough understanding of Danjia family culture. Take the saltwater songs as an example. Only a few people can sing the saltwater songs completely and also be familiar with the entire process of traditional Danjia family water weddings and other ceremonies. And the younger generation who possess such abilities is even rarer. (Wu, L. (2018). Beihai Danjia "Salty Water Songs". *Wenshi Chunqiu* (Cultural and Historical Annals), (08), 35-39.) , According to the interview content of Shen Hongjie, a descendant of the Danjia saltwater songs, no suitable successor for the Danjia songs has been found yet - this is in line with the viewpoint in Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory that "the successor is the core carrier of intergenerational transmission of cultural memory". The absence of successors directly threatens the continuation of the memory chain. The younger generation of the Danjia villages usually choose to work on land or go to other regions for employment. Economic pressure and the impact of modern culture have significantly reduced their interest in learning traditional skills. Currently, the registered Danjia cultural successors in Beihai City are generally older, and the phenomenon of "no successors" is very common. For example, the number of successors for Saltwater songs and Danjia clothing has become extremely scarce, and they are all elderly people. The intergenerational knowledge transmission chain is on the verge of breaking.

Impact of tourism commercialization on cultural authenticity

With the rapid development of tourism in Beihai, some elements of the Danjia culture have been simplified and

modified to meet the needs of tourists. For instance, the traditional Danjia opening of the sea ceremony has evolved into an annual event organized by a formal organization, with many performance programs added.



(Danjia opening of the sea ceremony of the 2024 in Beihai)

(Image Source: Online photography images)

The saltwater songs have been adapted into lively pop-style songs; (Chen, L. X. (2020). A study on the development of Beihai Danjia folk culture tourism. *Time-honored Brand Marketing*, (04), 1-2.) Furthermore, nowadays the descendants of the ancient Danjia people all choose to hold their wedding ceremonies on land, integrating the local land customs and culture into the ceremony. Under the influence of commercialization, the cultural expression forms have gradually deviated from their original state, posing a serious challenge to the authenticity of the culture.

The Innovations in the Inheritance of Beihai Danjia Culture

To solve the problem of the inheritance of the Danjia culture, the practice focuses on three core issues: the disappearance of the carrier, the generation gap, and the aging of the inheritors, as well as the impact of tourism commercialization. innovative measures are proposed : According to the theory of dynamic inheritance, fishing boats are transformed into "mobile workshops" and idle ship houses are transformed into "craftsman sharing spaces" to revitalize the carriers ; by leveraging the participatory culture theory, collaboration between the young and the old is used to record tacit knowledge , encouraging young people to actively disseminate it ; relying on this theory, a "light observation, deep participation" dual model is established to balance cultural authenticity and residents' rights, injecting vitality into the culture.

Addressing the disappearance of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers

The core idea of the theory of living inheritance holds that the vitality of culture lies in its ongoing practice rather than static preservation. It emphasizes that culture should rely on specific production and living scenarios

and be passed down through continuous use and practice, and opposes isolating cultural carriers as museum exhibits.

Regarding the issue of traditional Danjia families' boat houses and other carriers transforming from "living tools" into "static exhibits", Select 2-3 well-preserved traditional Danjia family wooden fishing boats and upgrade them into "Danjia Family Cultural Mobile Workshops". The hulls retain the original fishing function framework, while additional simple operation tables and small audio equipment (for improvisational singing of saltwater songs) are added. Regular "Workshop Sea Outing Activities" are organized, starting from the dock, transporting tourists or primary and secondary school students to participate in activities such as offshore fishing or shallow sea shell collecting and net casting. During the process, the inheritors simultaneously explain the Danjia family's lifestyle on the boat and related ritual activities of Danjia family culture. On the return journey , participants are taught to sing fragments of saltwater songs. This "carrier + practice" model transforms the Danjia family's boat houses from museum exhibits into operational cultural classrooms, re-binding the material carrier and intangible skills (fishing, saltwater songs) in real scenarios. Secondly, idle traditional boat houses can be transformed into shared spaces for Danjia family life skills. Inside, touchable fishing net raw materials and repaired fishing tools are placed. Regularly, inheritors are invited to stay, residents can bring old fishing nets to learn repair techniques, tourists can also participate and take away the finished products. At the same time, Danjia family culture-related books and old photo copies are provided for people to read and exchange. Making the boat houses a public space for "resident daily skills exchange + tourist experience", integrating traditional carriers into contemporary community life.

Addressing the breakdown of intergenerational transmission and the aging of the inheritors

The Participatory Culture Theory was proposed by American media scholar Henry Jenkins in 1992. Jenkins emphasized that participatory culture does not mean that every member within a community must engage in content creation, but rather that the entire cultural ecosystem encourages and supports such participation. In this culture, ordinary users are no longer merely passive recipients of media content, but rather become active participants capable of creating, sharing, modifying and disseminating content.

For the elderly Danjia family inheritors, young assistants are assigned to help record the loss of tacit knowledge caused by aging (such as the improvisational

skills of salty water songs and the tricks for repairing fishing boats), addressing the issue of recording and preserving this information. At the same time, young people are organized to participate in knowledge exploration as "researchers + collaborators", stimulating a sense of active participation, and transforming young people from "passive learners" to "active knowledge recorders". The results of the exploration are not limited to written manuals; they can be recorded as videos or illustrated as comic manuals. After being reviewed by the inheritors, these results can be published through official accounts and social platforms, allowing for a natural understanding of the cultural connotations during the "recording - transformation - dissemination" process. At the same time, it helps the inheritors make the tacit knowledge explicit, preventing its loss due to aging.

Responding to the impact of tourism commercialization on the authenticity of culture

The core of integrating the key concepts of participatory cultural theory lies in breaking away from the traditional paradigm of "culture producers' one-way output and audience's passive consumption", and emphasizing that the vitality of culture stems from the active participation of multiple entities.

The Danjia family communities independently select families that still maintain traditional production and living habits, such as those who make a living by fishing in the coastal waters and those who can weave traditional fishing nets. An open cultural experience is created based on the real production and living scenarios of Danjia families, divided into two modes : light and deep, to meet different needs. The light mode is open to a wide range of tourists, while Danjia family members naturally carry out tasks like repairing fishing nets and processing catches (such as drying fish and peeling shrimp shells) in their own courtyards or docks. During the work, they hum salty water songs (not for deliberate performance), and tourists can observe and take photos in the designated area. The family hosts share casually in an informal manner, combining explanations of daily life contents such as : This salty water song is the old tune taught by my mother, etc., which are real life details. The government provides family open subsidy every month to alleviate the burden. For tourists who stay for a longer period, a deep open mode is set up. Tourists can participate in a daily activity of the family as helpers and can follow the family to go out to sea for fishing, or jointly dry catches, or assist in preparing Danjia family dinner in the evening. During the process, they do not interfere with the family's real process. After the experience, tourists can voluntarily pay the cost of ingredients, which will all belong to the family. At the

same time, to guide tourists to understand the true essence, a scene interpretation card is provided as a supplement. Simple interpretation cards are set up around the open scenes, focusing on the "association between culture and life", rather than performing-style introduction, to help tourists understand that culture is not a deliberate performance but a natural expression of life.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Conclusion

The conclusion of challenges

Through qualitative research methods, it was concluded that the Danjia family culture of the people in the Beihai is facing three core challenges in the context of rapid urbanization, industrialization and digitalization : the disappearance of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers, the breakage of intergenerational transmission, the aging of the inheritors, and the impact of tourism commercialization on the authenticity of the culture. These challenges collectively constitute a systematic "survival soil" crisis.

The conclusion of Innovations

In response to the three core challenges in the inheritance of Beihai's Danjia family culture - the disappearance of "traditional living spaces and carriers", the "breakage of intergenerational inheritance and aging of inheritors", and the "impact of commercial tourism on authenticity", precise strategies have been proposed by combining corresponding theories: Based on the theory of dynamic inheritance, by transforming traditional wooden fishing boats into "mobile workshops" and idle boat houses into shared spaces for skills, the cultural carriers are revitalized through the "carrier + practice" model ; Relying on the participatory cultural theory (proposed by Henry Jenkins), young assistants are provided for older inheritors to explore and disseminate tacit knowledge in the role of "researcher + collaborator", thus solving the problem of intergenerational inheritance ; Similarly, based on the participatory cultural theory, the Danjia family community selects families to create "light observation + deep participation" layered experiences, and provides "scene interpretation cards" to guide the understanding of cultural authenticity. Through the collaborative efforts of multiple strategies, Danjia family culture can achieve dynamic inheritance.

Discussion

The discussion of Challenges

In Beihai, the traditional living space and cultural carrier of the Danjia people have vanished, resulting in a gap in cultural inheritance. The inheritors are gradually aging, and the influence of commercialization of tourism has also contributed to the crisis faced by the Danjia family

culture in the new era. According to the theory of cultural memory (Aleida Assmann) , The essence of the Danjia family culture crisis is the collapse of the cultural memory system.

The disappearance of traditional living spaces and the modernization of fishing have destroyed the "material carriers" of memories (such as fishing villages and fishing boats) - these spaces were the "memory anchors" for singing sea songs and passing on fishing skills. The loss of these spaces meant that cultural practices lost their support; the transmission gap and the aging of the inheritors cut off the "generational chain" of memories - the Danja culture is mostly "interpersonal memory" passed down orally and by heart. The death of elders prevented the transmission of living knowledge, causing the memory chain to break; the commercialization of tourism has alienated the "authenticity" of memories - cultural symbols (such as simplified rituals and adapted sea songs) have been detached from their original context and turned into commodities, losing the ethnic identity and historical connotations that carry memories. And all three are interrelated: the loss of carriers accelerates the generation gap, commercialization further undermines the authenticity of memories, and ultimately leads to a systemic crisis. These challenges do not exist independently but are interrelated and evolving systemic crises. Urbanization and the modernization of fisheries directly erode the physical space and production methods on which culture relies, resulting in the loss of the "background" of cultural practices and the actual loss of meaning for skills such as sea songs, thereby accelerating the disruption of intergenerational transmission. At the same time, although the commercialization of tourism attempts to find solutions for the continuation of culture, it actually brings another threat.

The discussion of innovations

Against the three core challenges faced in the inheritance of Beihai Danjia culture, the three proposed innovative strategies are all supported by theories.

The three strategies are highly consistent with the core propositions of the selected theories. When addressing the loss of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers, the Living Heritage Theory emphasizes that "the survival of culture depends on practice rather than static preservation". To implement this, the strategy transforms traditional Danjia wooden fishing boats into "mobile cultural workshops" and idle boat houses into "skill-sharing spaces", restoring practical functions to these carriers that had previously been reduced to mere exhibits. The boat houses become public spaces for residents to exchange skills and for tourists to engage in light cultural experiences, re-linking material carriers with intangible skills (such as fishing techniques and salty water songs) in real-life scenarios.

The latter two strategies are framed around Henry Jenkins' Participatory Culture Theory, which advocates the co-creation of cultural value by multiple subjects. To tackle the breakdown of intergenerational inheritance and the aging of inheritors, young assistants take the initiative to become producers of cultural content (e.g., recording and disseminating the inheritors' implicit knowledge). When addressing the impact of tourism commercialization on cultural authenticity, the Danjia community takes the lead in selecting families that retain traditional lifestyles for cultural experience programs. Tourists are transformed from "consumers of commercial performances" to "participants in family daily life", embodying the theoretical connotation of cultural holders and recipients jointly constructing cultural meaning.

These three strategies achieve a three-dimensional balance between cultural authenticity, inheritance effectiveness, and sustainability. They avoid the disconnection between cultural carriers and their original living contexts. In terms of inheritance effectiveness, young people shift from "passive learning" to "active creation": through the transformation and dissemination of cultural knowledge, they naturally deepen their understanding of Danjia culture, solving the dilemma of "young people's reluctance to learn" in the traditional master-apprentice system. Additionally, the family-based experience model allows tourists to understand the culture by "observing real labor" and "participating in daily affairs", rather than watching standardized performances, which helps them form a more authentic perception of Danjia culture. The model where the government provides subsidies to participating families and tourists voluntarily pay for food costs not only reduces the burden on Danjia families but also brings them reasonable income, achieving a win-win situation for "community service" and "cultural communication". Overall, the core value of these three innovative strategies lies in shifting the inheritance of Danjia culture from "passive preservation" to "active activation", providing a reference for the inheritance of similar intangible cultural heritage (ICH) that is rooted in production and daily life. The key insight is that ICH preservation must respect the dominant position of cultural holders, integrate culture back into real-life scenarios, and simultaneously address the needs of different groups. Only through the two-way interaction of theoretical guidance and practical optimization can "living heritage inheritance" be achieved, rather than preservation as a "living fossil".

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