

# “Honeycomb”: The Endogenous Power of Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance

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## ABSTRACT

Dynamics of the transmission of intangible cultural heritage has been a major concern in recent years. With the administrative and production dynamics mechanisms facing questions and practical difficulties, how to explore and stimulate the endogenous dynamics of intangible cultural heritage conservation and to achieve its sustainable development has become the top priority. According to the investigation and research on a state-level intangible cultural heritage, Nine-Dragon Dance, it is found that the characteristics of inheritors, clan inheritance and community participation are the three key factors for the internal development. Taking the Nine-Dragon Dance as an example, this article draws on the concept of honeycomb society from neoclassical “structure-function” theory to analyse the endogenous dynamics of intangible cultural heritage transmission, with a view to providing a reference for the “traditional-modern” transformation of intangible heritage.

**Keywords:** *Intangible cultural heritage, Endogenous development, Neoclassical "structure-function" theory*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

How to ensure the vitality of intangible cultural heritage (hereinafter abbreviated as ICH) and promote its sustainable development is the key to the protection. The source of dynamics for it has also become the core issue of inheritance work. With the accumulation of more than 30 years of cultural work experience and academic researches, answers to this question has formed two types of views: administrative power and production power.

The administrative power arises from cultural administration. Since the promulgation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on ICH in 2011, China has gradually established a system of government-led, socially engaged for the protection of ICH. But it faces two problems: one is the cost problem, and the other is the subjectivity of inheritors. In the face of the vast amount of ICH in China, and the world, official efforts and financial support are limited, and its strength lies in "rescue" rather than "transmission", and its function in solving the dilemma of transmission practice in the context of social transition is still limited; at the same time, the context of ICH protection and transmission is frozen in "cultural undertakings supported by public policies", and the evaluation criteria, protection mechanism and transmission practice of ICH mainly depend on the government's regulatory measures,

resulting in the misalignment and contradiction between the belonging groups and the protectors.

The production dynamics originates from the principle of innovation, which is embodied in the model practice of productive conservation, in which ICH is transformed into productivity and products through production, distribution and sales. The academics has widely paid attention to the functions played by the integration of the productive conservation of ICH with the development of secondary and tertiary industries in urban and rural areas. However, its criticism and reflection should not be ignored as well. On the one hand, it is not absolute whether ICH can take the path of modern industrial development, and different heritage items cannot be generalized; on the other hand, the spirituality and sharing of folk culture are contrary to the efficiency and monopoly of commercial capital, which easily leads to the over-commercialization of intangible cultural heritage products and the over-industrialization of intangible cultural heritage projects, resulting in the dilemma of misalignment between the creators and the enjoyers of ICH, and leading to the deprivation of the rights of ICH inheritance groups.

The policy dynamic and production dynamic of the ICH protection movement are constantly being reassessed, proving that the protection model from the

perspective of other subjects is no substitute for the more legitimate "self" inheritance, and stimulating more endogenous dynamics has become the objective goal of ICH protection and inheritance. ICH is a spontaneous and endogenous culture that originates from the daily lives of local people and is transmitted through their wisdom, and in order to realize the self-blooming of intangible cultural heritage in a dynamically transforming social structure, it is necessary to continuously explore and stimulate the endogenous power of the transmission community. The prospect of ICH preservation lies in the sustainable development of rural communities, and the context of its existence is best set by the communities where it is produced and preserved. In this regard, this paper uses the neoclassical "structure-function" theory as a theoretical framework to investigate the national intangible cultural heritage, the Nine-Dragon Dance, which is rooted in rural communities and people's lives, and to reveal its conservation and transmission practices.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS**

### ***2.1. "Structure-function" generates endogenous power***

UNESCO defines "endogenous development" as "development that comes from within" and "the science of transformation into culture (including technology, economy, environment, etc.)." The socio-cultural factor is both a determining factor and a result of development. From the perspective of social structure, scholar Peilin Li points out that the transformation of basic structural elements, such as family and social network, creates a huge potential force, which is the "other invisible hand" in addition to the administrative force. Jijiao Zhang further draws the paradigm of neoclassical "structure-function" theory: ICH is a unity of structure and function, and is located in certain external structures (such as urban communities, traditional villages and towns, etc.), forming a structure capable of resource allocation over a long period of historical evolution, becoming "structural heritage". Structural heritage not only can self-generate certain organizational structures, but also can influence external structures such as regions, cities and towns, and countries.

From the above researches, it is clear that sociocultural factors have the dual characteristics (Structural and functional), and that the changes in socio-cultural structures resulting from social transformation are the source of power for the endogenous development of ICH. As a precious form of folk culture, ICH had undergone structural transformation and functional role in historical changes, accumulated capital for its own protection and inheritance, improved the organizational system of inheritance, and realizes endogenous development.

### ***2.2. Discussing the structure and functionality of Nine-Dragon Dance***

The Nine-Dragon Dance is a Chinese national ICH in the category of traditional dance. According to historical records, "It began in the Han Dynasty, flourished in the Tang Dynasty, and is performed to this day." Compared with other general types of dragon dance, the Nine-Dragon Dance presents a large performance line-up (more than two hundred people), complex performance routines (more than one hundred kinds), and strict institutional arrangements. It originated from the Yao clan in Baiyang Village, Pingjiang County, Hunan Province. It was passed down within the Yao clan in the early days, and later became a collective dance widely participated by the villagers. In 1986, the Nine-Dragon Dance team was established, consisting of all "dragon soldiers" (dragon dancers) and logisticians, and is managed by the Dragon Association. The history of the Nine-Dragon Dance is more than 2,000 years, from Yao's traditional rituals to celebratory dances in the community, permeating all areas of life in Baiyang Village, and closely connected to the daily life of the villagers.

#### ***2.2.1. The structural nature of the Nine-Dragon Dance***

The Nine-Dragon Dance is a structural heritage, which is essentially a set of systematic constructs and existences. Jijiao Zhang's paradigm of the "honeycomb society" can provide a reference to analysing the autopoietic structure (or self-expanding) of ICH. The "honeycomb society" is used to analyse the self-directed resource allocation behaviour of the private sector, which is also an important part of the "other invisible hand" (social structure). The honeycomb structure describes how, in the context of economic and social transformation and the shift of privilege, ordinary people, as individuals in social relations, like hard-working bees, weave a network of relationships based on blood and geographical ties or for the purpose of mutual benefit, in order to gain more market space and development opportunities. As a folk cultural resource with a long history, the Nine-Dragon Dance is also a microcosm of the historical and cultural practices of the local people, with a certain organisation, institutional arrangements and cultural connotations, with the Dragon Association as the management body and the It has a series of strict performance rituals and management systems, and a united and enterprising dragon spirit, forming a strong influence on local economic and cultural activities, and becoming a folk power that cannot be ignored, with a typical "honeycomb" structure.

### 2.2.2. *Functionality of the Nine-Dragon Dance*

At the same time, the Nine-Dragon Dance has a strong resource allocation function, which can accumulate capital and provide endogenous development momentum for its own preservation and transmission. Coleman notes that the use of the concept of “social capital” analyses of the function of social structures and the identification of their characteristics. Social capital is one of the three forms of capital, along with physical and human capital, and it is found in the structure of interpersonal relationships, which are formed when relationships between people change into a way that facilitates actions. *Obligations and expectations, information networks, norms and effective punishment and relations of authority* are the basic expressions of social capital. In both the period of clan inheritance and the period of collective village inheritance, members act on morals, customs and practices as the basic logic of their actions, creating strong bonds and mutual trust over time, and possessing a rich stock of social capital. The process of generation and accumulation of physical and social capital will be elaborated later in the paper in relation to the inheritance practices of the Nine-Dragon Dance.

### 2.3. *Research methods*

Drawing on the structural model of the “honeycomb society”, the following methods were adopted: (1) the Literature Research Method, in which a large number of historical materials were reviewed; (2) the Field Survey Method, in which interviews were obtained from the inheritors of the Nine-Dragon Dance, members of the Dragon Association, local villagers, and staff of the government. Summarize the three specific forms of the “honeycomb” inheritance structure of the Nine-Dragon Dance that has been continuously self-expanding in the course of historical changes

## 3. THE SPECIFIC FORM OF THE “HONEYCOMB” INHERITANCE

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the Nine-Dragon Dance is a structural heritage that combines structure nature and functionality, and exhibits the typical characteristics as a “honeycomb society”. At the same time, social capital is accumulated and transformed through the beehive-like association with its members, further strengthening the endogenous power of the Jiu Long dance heritage. In the following, the three kinds of the specific inheritance structure pattern of Nine Dragons V will be further analysed.

### 3.1. *The "queen Bee": the qualities of the inheritors of the Nine-Dragon Dance*

Each generation of the Nine-Dragon Dance has one main inheritor and several inheritors, the former being a single lineage of the Yao family and the latter being outstanding practitioners of the same generation. The main inheritors of ICH, represented by Zongru Yao and Daming Yao, symbolize the “queen bee” in the structure of the beehive, and play the role of the pioneer in the protection and inheritance mechanism of the Nine-Dragon Dance, and accumulate social capital such as relations of authority.

In the early development stage of the Nine-Dragon Dance, the main inheritors assumed the functions of leaders, commanders and cultural symbols, constituting the core strength of the inherited group. The Dragon Association implemented a system of intra-clan selection of inheritors, the criteria of which were: men of Yao surname of the right age (eighteen years old and above), with decent personality, good conduct, and high talent in dragon dance, were elected through the joint election of Yao family members. The first generation of Yao Zongru, born in 1655, was a local sage who often organized yellow dragons to perform in Pingyi County and Yuezhou County, and was very popular among the people for his excellent skills, starting a period of universal participation in the Nine-Dragon Dance. The other major inheritor of the dance was Sanjun Yao, born in the Qing Dynasty, who performed on the Arch Bridge for an audience of 10,000 people, cleverly resolving a stage mishap with a difficult move called “crossing the bridge to catch the dragon pearl”, bringing the dance to fame.

Inheritors in the new era not only represent a key role in the transmission and development of intangible cultural heritage culture, but are also given a series of socio-cultural significance in terms of social organization and management, and participation in the public cultural life of the country. Daming Yao, the first major inheritor after the founding of People's Republic of China, facilitated the transformation and development of the Nine-Dragon Dance from traditional to modern. Daming Yao was born in 1957 in Baiyang Village and was elected the eighth generation of the main inheritor of the Nine-Dragon Dance in 2005. Daming Yao's outstanding contributions to the Nine-Dragon Dance was below: (1) served as the president of the Dragon Association and organizing the establishment of the Nine-Dragon Dance Team, an organization dedicated to performance; (2) organized the revision of the rules and regulations of the team to standardize it; (3) led the team to participate in national, provincial and municipal festivals and artistic performances and competitions for more than a hundred occasions; (4) participated in the documentary recording of CCTV International Channel and Science Education Channel for many times and other publicity work; (5)

opened the Nine-Dragon Dance Training Base in the local Middle School and wrote teaching materials. In 2018, Yao Daming was selected as the representative inheritor of the fifth batch of national ICH projects (the first national representative inheritor of the Nine-Dragon Dance).

The main inheritors of ICH have left a legacy of moving legends, passed on valuable skills, and participated in major cultural undertakings, proving that the Nine-Dragon Dance has a strong background, a symbol of cultural authority and a form of social capital (*relations of authority*). The inheritors often act as the leaders of the Dragon Association, becoming charismatic leaders with their own cultural and political status, and function in promoting the practice of the Nine-Dragon Dance and solving related public issues.

**3.2. Clan-based “honeycomb”: the transmission of ICH through consanguinity**

The interdependence of traditional agriculture and land has given rise to the long-standing clan organization and clan culture in China. As an ideology commonly recognized by clan members, clan culture can intervene in all social activities within the clan through organization. The Nine-Dragon Dance has emerged as a cultural institution that maintains clan identity through clan affiliation and forms a law of succession for intangible cultural heritage based on consanguinity, bringing endogenous structural power to cultural heritage. Through the operation of the succession system, the clan-based “honeycomb” continuously accumulates material and social capital, and promotes the endogenous development of the Nine-Dragon Dance.

Clan property is the basis for clan organizations and an important support for material capital in the process of Nine Dragons’ Dance transmission. The basic elements of clan property consist of the clan ancestral hall, clan fields, and clan contributions, which are the main source of funding for public activities and an important guarantee of economic relief within the clan. In the early stage, the Dragon Association was located at the Yao Clan Ancestral Hall, known as the Nine-Dragon Dance

Hall, which was a special place for artistic seminars, rehearsals, performances and training. After the completion of the ICH recognition, the Nine-Dragon Dance Training Institute was set up at the original location of the ancestral hall. It is self-funded by the Dragon Association and has been seeking local financial resources to gradually improve the infrastructure of the Institute. At present, the institute is the main venue for teaching and training of the Nine-Dragon Dance, and is open to the public as a provincial cultural heritage unit, offering training classes and cultural lectures for students on the dance. The supply and maintenance of the playgrounds, percussion instruments, costumes and props is also dependent on the active financial support of clansmen, members of Dragon Associations and inheritors of ICH. Although the actual clan assets have been dissipated because of the establishment of new laws, the clan network has always functioned as the “other invisible hand” to influence the allocation of resources.

Institutional succession rules are an important expression of a structural heritage, and also an important source of social capital in the clan-based “honeycomb”. During the Qing Dynasty, in order to win the competitions which were held in the Dragon Boat Festival and show the power of the famous clan, the Yao clan made the practice of the dragon dance a compulsory duty for clansmen, and established the corresponding Dragon Rules, which have been passed down to this day. It stipulated that if a person does not join the dragon team when he or she meets the age requirements, he or she will not be allowed to gain the assistance of families in daily production or at weddings and funerals, and will never be included in the family tree. Outstanding performers have the opportunity to be elected as the main inheritor of the Nine-Dragon Dance and enjoy a position of authority in the cultural activities of the community, so people are proud to dance the dragon. The combination of family obligation and the desire to become famous encouraged family members to take an active part in the practice of the dance, and further connected them within the clan, which accumulated much social capital of *Obligations and expectations*.

**Table 1.** Genealogy of the main inheritors of the Nine-Dragon Dance

Members	Time of birth	Notes
Zongru Yao	1655	Deceased, formerly President of the Dragon Association
Jinchen Yao	1705	Idem
Xinlin Yao	1752	Idem
Nanxun Yao	1709	Idem
Binshan Yao	1840	Idem
Sanjun Yao	1905	Idem

Jongqu Yao	1920	Idem
Daming Yao	1957	State-level Representative ICH Inheritors
Manhua Yao	1961	Municipality-level Representative ICH Inheritors

Now, the transformed Nine-Dragon Dance no longer binds its members in the form of feudal family precepts, but the cultural system based on consanguinity still functions endogenously. The Yao clan motto has evolved into the core values of the art of the Nine-Dragon Dance, namely, "Love the country, support the government, obey the law, love the clan, respect the teachers, be diligent in your studies, be honest and sincere, forbid evil practices, and keep the family style pure forever". It has also formed explicit norms in various aspects such as interpersonal relations, business training, personnel management and facilities and finance. The clan organisation also provides the direction for the organisation to build a spiritual civilisation, and the interaction of the members of the dragon team includes not only training in dragon dancing but also education in moral and filial piety. The team is managed in a patriarchal manner, with regular family meetings chaired by the leader, where members are commended or criticised for their work, while at the same time being given space to interact with each other in their productive lives, strengthening the emotional ties between clansmen.

It is clear that the clan-based "honeycomb" has a large stock of material and social capital, which provides an important endogenous impetus for the conservation and transmission of the Nine-Dragon Dance. On the one hand, the social network built by the clan provides material capital for the conservation and transmission of the Nine Dragons Dance; on the other hand, the succession system of the Nine-Dragon Dance provides social capital for the transmission of the skills in terms of obligations and expectations, and the transmission of the Nine Dragons Dance becomes an obligation of the clan and constitutes the cultural memory that carries the clan together.

### ***3.3. Village-based "Honeycomb": geo-embedding and community participation***

The Nine-Dragon Dance was not only a spiritual bond that united the families, but also became a ritual that united the neighbours and served as a bonding function. The evolution of clans' relations provides an opportunity for the construction of a modern community transmission model for the Nine-Dragon dance. In order to unite the villagers and promote the exchange and mutual assistance of Nine-Dragon dances, the Yao inheritors abandoned the feudal ideology of excluding foreign surnames and the superiority of men over women in the

regulations. People with different surnames (Qi, Zhu, Hu and other surnames) and women from the village joined the dragon team, reaching a peak of more than 600 people dancing the dragon together. The structure of the inherited group of the Nine Dragons Dance has expanded since under the influence of geography.

The construction of a village-based "honeycomb" relies on the structural force of the community's common will. Communities are spiritual unions, whose three roots are the intimate union of blood, proximity in space, and spiritual closeness. The Nine-Dragon dance under the clan system constructs a unique practice rule and practice space, which is transformed and reproduced in the process of communalization with the entry of a large number of villagers with foreign surnames.

On the one hand, the new Dragon Rules outlaw backward thinking and hard negative reinforcement, and contribute to the spiritual core of the Nine-Dragon Dance with more tolerant and positive norms, and become the common moral order of the community. The new Dragon Rules stipulate: consciously improve the level of ideology and morality, like the dragon, love the dragon, do not fight, scold, gang up and promote traditional virtues. The members of the dragon team integrate the moral code into the artistic display, and go around the village to perform and preach the spirit, showing the moral of the Nine-Dragon Dance culture. Whether it is a member of the dragon team or other villagers, if there is drug use, violence or vicious gambling, the dragon team will promptly advise them. If the advice is not successful, those who violate the taboo and their family members will be included in the "blacklist", and their weddings and funerals will not get the participation of the majority of the villagers. And for the people who behave properly, the dragon team will issue small packets of sacred tea and the "dragon talisman" made of red cloth for them when they carry out performances, symbolizing the blessing of the nine dragons to the people forever clear and auspicious and safe. Nowadays, many households still have the "dragon talisman" hanging on the top of their front doors and the reflectors of their cars or motorcycles.

On the other hand, the Nine-Dragon Dance has been given a new connotation and mission. In addition to its ritual function, it has also become a resident of major celebrations, cultural festivals and square arts in the community, expanding its own practice space and becoming an integral part of the rural public cultural space. The intangible and embedded spiritual elements

such as the performance skills, cultural atmosphere and cultural genes of the Nine-Dragon Dance have also been passed on.

The “traditional-modern” transformation of practice and space has positively reinforced the inheritance activities of villagers in the community, serving both as an incentive mechanism for the standardization of villagers' behaviours and as a glue for the collective consciousness of villagers in the community. The village-based “honeycomb” is no longer a closed and marginal culture belonging to a certain tribe or family, but a public culture with strong openness. The moral intervention of the Dragon Association and the subtle influence of the spirit of the Nine-Dragon Dance form a powerful social capital in the form of *norms and effective punishment*, as well as a capital in the form of *information network*, which plays an important function in the transmission of the skills and spiritual continuity of the Nine-Dragon Dance.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND INTROSPECTION

ICH is the most deeply rooted and influential important component of folk culture in China, like the foundation part of a building buried in the ground, but its function is potential, lasting and solid. As modernization breaks through the boundaries of traditional cultural fields, the survival environment of ICH is constantly facing challenges. Nevertheless, we should not be pessimistic about its culture from a static perspective, but should pay close attention to the challenges to the survival of ICH, and at the same time, put our perspective on the transformation within intangible cultural heritage to discover its new structure and function in the process of “traditional-modern” transformation.

Whereas, from a long-term perspective, the self-inherited structural system of the Nine-Dragon Dance still faces certain risks. The large number of participants and the large consumption of performance equipment and props required make the long-term stable operation of the dragon team inevitably inseparable from the support of many human and physical capital. Since the productive income from farming in the village cannot sustain the funding of the dragon team, the members of the dragon team either accept the employment of capital in the countryside or follow the footsteps of the labor force in the city, in short, they are bound to enter other economic structures different from the original “honeycomb”. But the modern economy with economical operation as the basic logic is ultimately incompatible with the dedicative spirit of the Dragon Team. If the members' daily work and life are dependent on the atomized modern economy, and force the members who work outside the village to return to the hometown at any time, this is obviously an unrealistic, fragmented and unsustainable mode of inheritance.

Therefore, the consolidation of the economic foundation of the countryside is a necessary prerequisite for the protection and inheritance of ICH of the villagers. The emphasis on the stimulation of the endogenous power does not mean that the power of the market and the power of the government are completely ignored. Under a prerequisite of protecting the originality of intangible cultural heritage and valuing the endogenous function of intangible cultural heritage, increasing financial investment to make up for the gap in material conditions, appropriately combining with the tertiary industry to make up for the plight of weak rural cultural and economic industries, and improving rural cultural productivity can promote the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Nan Chen conducted the field survey and literature collection, analysed the theoretical framework and model, and wrote the main part of the article.

Xiaodong Huang contributed the main idea and writing outline of the article, conducted the reference search, and revised the paper.

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