

Craft Inheritance and Community Symbiosis: Living Inheritance and Innovative Paths of Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship

Deqi Luo*

School of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730000, Gansu, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

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Abstract: This study takes the “Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship”—an intangible cultural heritage (ICH) item of Sichuan Province—as its research object. Rooted in the context of local ICH research, it systematically explores the internal logic, practical paths, and realistic dilemmas of its living inheritance and modern transformation. First, the study sorts out the symbiotic relationship between the craftsmanship and the region, shaped by Huili’s unique copper resources and the historical context of the Southern Silk Road. Then, from the perspective of “Folklore of Craftsmen”, it analyzes the generation mechanism of embodied practice and tacit knowledge in the oral and experiential transmission model, as well as the risk of intergenerational discontinuity. On this basis, it focuses on how the craftsmanship has achieved creative transformation from a practical cooking utensil to a cultural symbol through functional improvement and form innovation under the guidance of the concept of productive protection. Furthermore, the study discusses how inheritance subjects represented by the Fengtongjiang Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Research and Study Base in Luchang Town, Huili City, have promoted positive interaction between cultural identity and economic benefits in the context of cultural-tourism integration and rural revitalization by constructing community participation mechanisms. The research finds that the vitality of Huili red copper hot pot stems from the organic unity of the craftsmanship itself, inheritance subjects, and the community context in dynamic practice. Its experience provides an insightful local model for the sustainable inheritance of traditional handicraft ICH.

Keywords: Huili Red Copper Hot Pot; Living inheritance; Productive protection; Embodied practice; Community participation

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1. Introduction

1.1. Deepening theoretical cognition of ICH protection

The advancement of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection has promoted the deepening academic understanding of its inherent nature as living and life-integrated. Han Chengyan points out that the essence of ICH lies in its intangible core, which gives rise to basic attributes such as life-orientation, living nature, and embodiment. These attributes together form an organic theoretical framework [1]. This theoretical construction provides a key analytical tool for understanding the survival mechanism of traditional handicraft ICH. As an important type of ICH, traditional handicrafts exhibit a profound

dialectical relationship between material carriers and intangible techniques. Therefore, research on Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship must go beyond the static appreciation of the finished product and delve into the entire process of its production, circulation, and consumption to explore the internal driving forces behind its technical inheritance and cultural continuity.

1.2. Contemporary predicament of Huili Red Copper Hot Pot

With a history of over 600 years, Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship emerged from Huili's abundant copper resources, cultural exchanges brought by the Southern Silk Road, and the creative practice of craftsmen over generations. Currently, under the multiple impacts of globalization, urbanization, and modern consumer culture, this craftsmanship also faces common dilemmas such as the unsustainability of the oral and experiential transmission model and insufficient willingness of the younger generation to inherit it. However, a group of inheritance subjects represented by the Fengtongjiang ICH Research and Study Base in Luchang Town, Huili City, has not only revitalized this ancient craftsmanship through a series of innovative practices but also driven the integrated development of local culture and tourism and improved community livelihoods.

1.3. Research foundation and approach

Existing studies have accumulated rich achievements in the modern transformation of traditional handicrafts. For example, the productive protection model emphasizes unifying cultural and economic values through reasonable production and circulation while safeguarding core techniques^[2]; research on living inheritance has constructed a multi-dimensional collaborative inheritance model^[3]; and the theory of cultural reconstruction has revealed the internal mechanism of traditional culture's selective innovation to adapt to new contexts^[4]. Nevertheless, existing research has paid insufficient attention to the typical case of the Huili red copper hot pot. Based on this, this study aims to integrate the material research perspective of "Folklore of Craftsmen" and the social analysis framework of community participation to systematically examine how Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship achieves living inheritance and creative transformation in contemporary society^[5-6]. It is expected to deepen the understanding of the dialectical relationship between inheritance and development in ICH protection.

2. Regional rootedness of craft formation and embodied inheritance

2.1. Symbiotic relationship between craftsmanship and region

The establishment of Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship profoundly reflects the dynamic construction of local knowledge in material practice. Huili City's proven copper reserves rank first in Sichuan Province, providing an unparalleled material foundation for copper processing. Through long-term practice, local craftsmen have identified that associated copper mined locally—free of harmful elements—must be used. Among them, copper from Luchang Town, Huili City, is regarded as the top-quality raw material for making hot pots due to its content of metals such as gold, silver, and selenium. This in-depth understanding and conscious application of material properties embody the conceptual initiative in the Folklore of Craftsmen as emphasized by Huang Jinghua. It is not purely technical rationality but a cultural choice integrating local knowledge and environmental adaptation^[5].

2.2. Oral and experiential transmission and embodied practice

The inheritance of Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship is essentially a process of embodied knowledge, with its core lying in ineffable tacit knowledge. Making a red copper hot pot involves dozens of complex procedures, among which "ten thousand hammer strikes" vividly encapsulates the essence of the craftsmanship. This process cannot be fully transmitted through words or standardized processes; it is deeply embedded in craftsmen's bodily memory and tactile experience, representing a typical form of embodied technology. Apprentices of Huili red copper hot pot must start with

basic hammering, comprehending the relationship between fire temperature, force, and form through years of practice, to internalize external technical regulations into their own knowledge.

3. Modern transformation and value reconstruction under productive protection

Productive protection of ICH manifests as a positive dialectical process in practice—seeking dynamic balance between protecting core techniques and exploring modern innovation. Wang Qian proposed that the modernization of traditional culture should transcend the replication model of “repeating what was said” and move toward the creative transformation of “continuing the discourse”^[2].

3.1. Functional innovation to adapt to modern needs

Under the framework of productive protection, strategic improvement of product functions has become the key link connecting traditional craftsmanship with modern life. The most representative measure for Huili red copper hot pot is transforming the traditional pure charcoal-burning copper pot into an induction cooker-compatible copper pot. This innovation strategically adjusts the heating method—a non-core element—while adhering to the core techniques of red copper material and hand forging. It effectively responds to modern families’ demands for environmental protection, hygiene, and convenience, ensuring the practicality of ICH products in contemporary daily life. Cao Lan et al. emphasized in their research on traditional food utensils that productive protection must balance the authenticity of craftsmanship with modern adaptability, realizing the transformation of artifacts from display items to daily necessities through functional innovation^[7]. The induction cooker-compatible copper pot is a successful practice of this idea.

3.2. Product form innovation and value expansion

Another important path for the modern transformation of Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship is to realize the in-depth excavation and reconstruction of cultural value through diversified innovation in product forms. On one hand, the product category has expanded from a single cooking hot pot to cultural and creative products with both artistic and practical value, such as copper mandarin duck hot pots (two-compartment hot pots), copper pomegranate plates, and copper vases. These products are linked to Huili’s regional cultural symbols, realizing the creative transformation of cultural value. On the other hand, creating giant copper pots as festival exhibition pieces has elevated copper utensils from daily necessities to works of art, embodying the path of enhancing product cultural added value through “industry-university-research collaboration” as advocated by Zhang Jiaojiao and Wang Jian^[8]. This diversified development is a specific manifestation of “selective innovation and combination” in Ma Guoqing’s theory of cultural reconstruction^[4].

4. ICH inheritance and identity reconstruction through community participation

The inheritance of Huili red copper hot pot has transcended closed workshop-style production and increasingly integrated into local community development and cultural ecological construction, forming a positive symbiotic pattern between ICH and the community.

4.1. Industrial development path driven by community participation

The value of community participation is first substantially reflected in the in-depth integration of ICH with the local economy, promoting industrial development and livelihood improvement. Through the “ICH + rural tourism” initiative, the Fengtongjiang ICH Research and Study Base in Luchang Town, Huili City, has received tens of thousands of tourists, significantly boosting community tourism income. Meanwhile, the base insists on employing rural low-income groups and people with disabilities as the main workforce, paying them a total of over one million yuan in wages. It has effectively

played the unique role of ICH in consolidating poverty alleviation achievements and promoting rural revitalization. Deng Xiaoyan emphasized that community participation is the foundation for the living inheritance of traditional handicrafts, as it can establish a two-way circulation mechanism between cultural identity and economic benefits^[6]. The practice in Luchang Town confirms this view.

4.2. Cultural communication and activation of community memory

Beyond pure economic benefits, the profound significance of community participation lies in activating collective memory and reconstructing local cultural identity through systematic cultural communication practices. The Fengtongjiang ICH Research and Study Base has received hundreds of primary and secondary school teachers and students, and has established in-depth cooperation with institutions of higher learning, such as Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, to carry out research and study activities. These initiatives not only allow the younger generation to experience the charm of ICH but also, as pointed out by Wang Yuan and Hu Huilin, activate the community cultural memory carried by artifact-based ICH and promote the reproduction of local cultural identity^[9]. In addition, by receiving overseas Chinese media, the base has made red copper hot pots a medium for displaying excellent traditional Chinese culture to the outside world, fulfilling its social responsibility as a cultural envoy.

5. Challenges in inheritance and future outlook

Despite the remarkable achievements in the inheritance of Huili red copper hot pot, it still faces numerous challenges in its development, which also reflect the common dilemmas in the current field of ICH protection.

5.1. Dilemma of balancing humanistic and commercial values

With the deepening of industrialization, avoiding the dilution and alienation of ICH authenticity by commercialization has become a core issue in inheritance practice. Ding Mei warned in her research on Uyghur earthenware that the cultural interpretation rights of inheritance subjects should be respected in the industrialization process, avoiding reducing them to production factors^[10]. As Huili red copper hot pots are sold as cultural and creative products at home and abroad, how to ensure that their core hand-forging techniques are not replaced by assembly line production, and how to prevent cultural symbols such as patterns and shapes from losing their spiritual connotations due to over-catering to the market, are issues that inheritance subjects must remain vigilant about.

5.2. Adaptability of inheritance models and risk of discontinuity

The embodied knowledge system based on oral and experiential transmission faces challenges in the adaptability and continuity of inheritance mechanisms in contemporary society. Guo Yanling's research on the Bai Meat Zhao Huo Shao (a traditional Chinese culinary craft) shows that the embodied nature of tacit knowledge makes its standardized recording extremely difficult^[11]. The tacit knowledge of "ten thousand hammer strikes" in Huili red copper hot pot faces similar risks. At the same time, the generational crisis and the contradiction between family workshop-style production and modern industrial efficiency, as pointed out by Chen Zhang and Tan Dashun, also exist in Huili^[3]. Although there are young inheritors like Feng Linhai (a descendant of the Fengtongjiang craftsman family) stepping forward, the situation where many young people are unwilling to inherit the ancestral craft remains severe.

5.3. Outlook for future sustainable inheritance paths

The sustainable development of Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship requires exploring more systematic paths based on existing successful experiences. Liang Jianye believes that ICH protection should go beyond the superficial recording of artifacts and techniques, and reveal the cultural grammar behind them through the dual narrative of "craftsmanship (Jiangyi)" and "craft spirit (Jiangxin)"^[12]. Therefore, in the future, the Folklore of Craftsmen method can be further applied

to conduct in-depth descriptions of inheritors' technical practices, constructing a more complete embodied knowledge archive. At the same time, efforts should be made to deepen the multi-dimensional collaborative living inheritance model, realizing the harmonious unity of technical protection, cultural inheritance, and community development.

6. Conclusion

The contemporary inheritance history of Huili Red Copper Hot Pot Craftsmanship is a transformation history from traditional handicraft to living cultural practice.

6.1. Multi-dimensional collaborative mechanism of craft inheritance

This study indicates that the vitality of Huili red copper hot pot in contemporary times lies in its construction of an organic system where craft inheritance, innovative transformation, and community participation are deeply linked and mutually supportive. At the technical level, it is deeply rooted in the region's unique material resources and cultural soil, maintaining the essence of its craftsmanship through an embodied inheritance model. In terms of development paths, it actively responds to the concept of productive protection, integrating traditional craftsmanship into modern life and the consumer market through a dual-track strategy of functional innovation and product form innovation, realizing the creative transformation of value. In terms of social effects, through in-depth community participation, it closely combines ICH protection with local cultural-tourism development, improvement of people's livelihood and employment, and reconstruction of cultural identity, forming a mutually beneficial and win-win positive ecology.

6.2. Enlightenment from local experience

The inheritance practice of Huili red copper hot pot profoundly reveals that the sustainable development of ICH requires constant adjustment and balance between traditional core and contemporary innovation, as well as between cultural logic and market forces. The commercialization risks and inheritance discontinuity crises exposed in its development also remind us that the modern transformation of ICH is always accompanied by tensions. The ultimate goal of ICH protection is not to freeze tradition in the past, but to stimulate its internal vitality, enabling it to continuously participate in the construction of current and future social and cultural life as an ever-growing cultural force. The experiences and reflections contained in this local case have important reference value for enriching the theoretical system of ICH protection with Chinese characteristics.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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