
From “Artisan” to “Social Innovator”: The Role Transformation and Action Logic of Mud Cuckoo Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritors

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Abstract: This paper focuses on inheritors of the intangible cultural heritage of Mud Cuckoos, exploring their transformation from traditional artisans to social innovators. It analyzes how, amid the fragmentation of cultural fields, these inheritors have constructed an open connection logic of action through identity reshaping, aesthetic awakening, and capital intervention. Simultaneously, it critically examines the tensions faced during modernization, including the alienation of craftsmanship and the capture by elites. The conclusion asserts that inheritors are fundamentally agents of subjectivity awakening. Intangible cultural heritage transmission should transcend mere technical preservation, returning to its sociological essence to achieve the perpetual circulation of culture and the symbiosis of values through social interaction.

Keywords: Artisans; Social innovators; Mud cuckoos; Intangible cultural heritage preservation; Role transformation

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1. The modern metaphor of clay-sculpted creatures

On the loess plateaus of northern Henan, Mud Cuckoos are more than just hand-molded dolls, they are a moist and warm piece of rural DNA left to us by the farming civilization. As a unique spiritual totem of places like Huaiyang and Junxian in Henan, these mottled clay creatures have long served as intermediaries between humans and deities, humans and nature. With clay as their bones and sound as their soul, they carry ancient narratives of prayers for favorable weather and prosperous offspring amid the bustle of temple fairs and solemn rituals. For artisans, this craft is an identity anchored in their bloodline. Every finger impression is a tender caress of their homeland, a silent observance of the ancient covenant where “the craftsman’s name is carved into the work ^[1].”

However, the hurricane of industrial civilization instantly tore away the warm veil of traditional agricultural society, casting this craft into the fissures of the times. As lifestyles underwent drastic transformations, the folk soil upon which the Mud Cuckoos once thrived gradually hardened. Its function plummeted from that of a sacred ritual vessel to a cheap

tourist trinket. Under the dual pressures of modern aesthetic standards and standardized industrial production, traditional artisans have fallen into a profound loss of craftsmanship, where their masterful techniques struggle to translate the emotional needs of contemporary consumers, while the spiritual essence they perceive is often dismissed by the market as synonymous with “rustic kitsch.” This profound sense of rupture has rendered their traditional livelihoods precarious. Artisans now waver between perseverance and abandonment, grappling with deep professional uncertainty and an existential crisis.

The paradigm of intangible cultural heritage preservation has quietly shifted from rescue-oriented preservation of specimens to an ecological approach of living transmission. Against this backdrop, the survival of Mud Cuckoos no longer hinges on the closed preservation of the craft itself, but on whether its inheritors can achieve profound self-transcendence, evolving from mere custodians of technique into socially innovative agents with a public vision. They must step beyond the physical walls of their workshops, break down the barriers of craftsmanship, and actively engage with the public sphere, using ancient skills to address the spiritual dilemmas of modern humanity^[2]. This role reconstruction is not merely a commercial transformation but an awakening of cultural agency, an attempt to reshape the tender bonds between people, communities, and traditions using clay in the fragmented fabric of modern life. It marks not only a turning point for Mud Cuckoos but also the inevitable path for traditional artisans seeking new dwelling places in contemporary society.

2. Field discontinuity and identity reshaping

Under the centrifugal force of modernity, the traditional context upon which Mud Cuckoos relies for survival is undergoing a dramatic field dispersion. Once deeply rooted in clan villages and specific festive spaces, these skills have now been thrust into a highly fluid open society. This process not only dismantles the old closed systems but also forces practitioners to undergo a profound reshaping of their identity, shifting from bloodline-based preservation to open social connections.

2.1. From bloodline transmission to socialized apprenticeship

The traditional bonds of inheritance based on blood ties and geographical proximity are loosening, giving rise to a modern adaptation of the master-apprentice system. Under the logic of agrarian civilization, the principle of passing down within the family but not to outsiders served both as a survival strategy to safeguard the family’s economic interests and as a sacred preservation of the purity of craftsmanship. However, in today’s era of knowledge sharing and digital dissemination, such closed knowledge barriers have become anachronistic^[3]. The transmission of Mud Cuckoos no longer adheres solely to the vertical path of father-to-son or master-to-apprentice. Instead, it increasingly exhibits characteristics of contractualization, socialization, and publicization. Modern inheritors now welcome apprentices from diverse regions and professional backgrounds. The relationship of skill transmission is gradually shifting from one of dependent personal allegiance toward an equal alliance based on shared interests and contractual agreements. This transformation is not a betrayal of tradition but a self-renewal of survival wisdom, by breaking through the narrow confines of bloodline, skills find new carriers within a broader social gene pool, thereby avoiding generational gaps in an era of constant flux.

2.2. From technical bearers to cultural interpreters

The social role of inheritors is undergoing a crucial shift from being mere holders of craftsmanship to interpreters of local culture. In the past, an exceptional artisan might have been content with being deft with their hands, finding their livelihood simply by molding the lively forms of the Chinese zodiac animals between their fingers. But in today’s era of symbol-driven consumption, masterful technique alone is insufficient to capture the audience’s attention. Bearers must elevate their craft from the hands to the mouth and ultimately to the mind, transforming the tacit knowledge once embedded in their fingertips into an explicit cultural language accessible to the masses. They must not only demonstrate “how it’s done” but also deeply interpret “why it’s done,” offering a modern translation of the fertility worship, totemic beliefs, and survival philosophy of the Yellow River basin embedded within the Mud Cuckoos^[4]. Through this process, inheritors reclaim

the narrative authority once monopolized by scholars or merchants, establishing themselves as the soulful interpreters of Mud Cuckoos culture. Their craft ceases to be an empty consumer symbol, instead becoming a cultural narrative rich with warmth and deep-rooted heritage.

2.3. From individual workshops to heritage-based community collaboration

Atomized production methods are evolving toward community-based collaboration rooted in intangible cultural heritage identity. Traditional workshops were often isolated islands of individual households, each fighting their own battles within their limited spaces, making them highly susceptible to market marginalization. Today, forward-thinking inheritors are stepping out of these closed workshops to actively build open social networks. This collaboration no longer remains confined to mutual aid among peers but has expanded into deep cross-sector partnerships with designers, artists, educational institutions, and even community residents. By establishing these communities rooted in cultural identity, the Mud Cuckoos has transformed from a meager tool for individual survival into a cultural fulcrum that unites community bonds and revitalizes rural economies. This shift signifies that inheritors are no longer artisans adrift on the margins of modern society, but are gradually evolving into social actors capable of mobilizing resources and reshaping community cultural confidence ^[5].

3. The evolution of action logic

When Mud Cuckoos is extracted from the dusty clamor of temple fairs and placed under the spotlight of modern society, the survival logic that underpins it undergoes a fundamental shift. This metamorphosis is not a linear replacement, but rather an interweaving and reconstruction of multiple logics. The inheritors are no longer passive adapters but have become acute agents, recalibrating the course of this ancient craft across three dimensions, aesthetics, capital, and society, to forge an entirely new value symbiosis system.

3.1. From ritual utility to aesthetic self-consciousness

Aesthetic logic underwent a profound transformation from “entertaining gods and people” to “aesthetic self-awareness.” Within traditional rural contexts, the Mud Cuckoos primarily existed as a vessel for divine or folk elements. It served as an offering in ancestral rituals and as a toy to amuse children. Its sculptural language, exaggerated movements, high-saturation colors, and distinctive perforated sound-producing structure, all catered to functional religious needs and entertainment demands. However, as modernity eroded the allure of the divine, the ritualistic functions once anchored to the Mud Cuckoos gradually weakened. Inheritors keenly recognized this symptom of the times and began consciously steering the Mud Cuckoos back toward their artistic essence ^[6]. This return is not a crude imitation of Western realism, but rather a bold formal reconstruction grounded in preserving the core aesthetic essence of rustic simplicity. They began simplifying intricate patterns to suit modern minimalist home decor, adjusting color contrasts to align with contemporary visual psychology, and even employing micro-sculpting techniques to transform the originally coarse folk toys into art collectibles with desk ornament value. This process essentially elevates the inheritors’ once-vague, collective unconscious aesthetic habits into a clear, subject-conscious aesthetic creation. It elevates the Mud Cuckoos from a rustic tool to an aesthetic object, securing it a place within the modern art system.

3.2. From market exchange to cultural and creative value empowerment

The intervention of capital logic has driven a transformation from simple marketplace exchange to complex cultural and creative empowerment. In traditional rural markets, the value of Mud Cuckoos was measured by extremely narrow and low standards, often equated solely to the cost of clay and minimal labor expenses, leaving the craft struggling near the poverty line for years. Today, innovative inheritors are introducing market mechanisms to reassess the value chain of Mud Cuckoos. They no longer merely sell physical clay sculptures but market the cultural added value and artisanal warmth

behind them. This shift has spurred business model innovation: cross-industry collaborations have become commonplace, with traditional craftsmanship and modern commercial culture finding common ground through collision and adaptation. Artisans are experimenting with IP licensing, embedding classic Mud Cuckoos designs into stationery, apparel, and digital media. Riding the wave of the experience economy, they transform workshops into educational spaces where consumers pay to participate in the sculpting process. Yet this path is far from smooth, fraught with the tension between traditional ethics and modern commercial rules. Bearers must navigate a delicate balance between preserving the purity of their craft and maximizing commercial potential, staying vigilant against capital's erosion of cultural authenticity while skillfully leveraging financial resources to amplify intangible heritage's resonance. This wisdom, conducting business while remaining true to artistic roots, has forged a new philosophy of survival for these custodians.

3.3. From technical transmission to social relationship production

The shift in social logic lies in the transition from skill delivery to relationship production. The creation and circulation of Mud Cuckoos no longer concern merely the exchange of goods. They have evolved into a powerful medium for rebuilding fractured social bonds. Against the backdrop of urban-rural duality, Mud Cuckoos serve as an emotional bridge connecting urban consumption with rural production. For urban residents, purchasing or experiencing Mud Cuckoos is not merely cultural consumption but a quest for lost nostalgia and a projection of the spiritual mirror image of pastoral life ^[7]. For rural communities, the actions of inheritors carry profound implications for social governance. By launching intangible cultural heritage study programs and organizing public education activities, they open their once-closed family workshops to society, fostering interactions among visiting tourists, scholars, students, and local villagers. This engagement breaks the cold isolation of atomized existence, reactivating rural interpersonal networks. In this process, the Mud Cuckoos functions as a "social adhesive," transmitting cultural memory across generations and weaving bonds of trust between communities. Through this practice, inheritors become embedded within rural governance structures. They not only mend the fractured neighborly bonds caused by population outflow but also reignite villagers' pride and cohesion in their local culture. Thus, the contemporary transmission of Mud Cuckoos transcends mere technical continuity, elevating into a social practice that rebuilds harmonious coexistence between people and communities through craftsmanship.

4. Traditional conventions and modern game theory

In the magnificent transformation of the Mud Cuckoos from rural origins to modern cultural prominence, a profound tension has always simmered beneath the surface. This is not merely a clash between old and new ideas, but an ontological crisis faced by traditional crafts as they integrate into modern social structures. While inheritors reap the benefits of their role transformation, they must confront a triple paradox: standardization versus alienation, elite capture versus cultural hollowing. This modern contest tests the wisdom and resolve of every artisan ^[8].

4.1. The tension between standardization and the alienation of handcrafted labor

There exists an irreconcilable rift between the demands of standardization and the alienation of craftsmanship. Modern market logic holds efficiency and uniformity as its guiding principles, fundamentally conflicting with the handmade nature of Mud Cuckoos. To meet the stringent standards of mass production and customization, some inheritors have been compelled to adopt industrial processes such as mold casting and standardized coloring. While these modifications boost short-term output, they inevitably erode the handmade warmth that defines the craft. The charm of Mud Cuckoos lies in the subtle textures formed by finger-pressing clay and the accidental color shifts born from kiln fires, vibrant imperfections that embody a vital rustic charm, precisely the kind of flaws industrial standards cannot tolerate. When every clay figurine becomes identical and glossy, it degenerates into an industrial replica on an assembly line, its authentic craftsmanship ruthlessly eroded. Artisans become mere appendages to machines, while the emotions and spirit once embedded in the clay are drained by standardized molds ^[9]. What remains are soulless clay shells, a bitter irony that undermines the very purpose

of keeping intangible cultural heritage alive.

4.2. Resource inequality and the dilemma of elite capture in intangible heritage transmission

The uneven distribution of resources has led to a structural dilemma of elite capture and grassroots disenfranchisement. Bolstered by both policy incentives for intangible cultural heritage preservation and commercial capital, elite inheritors with titles, connections, and influence often gain priority access to project funding, media coverage, and high-profile exhibition platforms, thereby reinforcing a Matthew effect. This excessive concentration of resources has created a few celebrated ICH masters while simultaneously erecting high industry barriers, squeezing out ordinary practitioners at the grassroots level. Many unsung veteran artisans face the dilemma of struggling to preserve their craft and struggling even more to pass it on, either because their skills aren't readily recognized by modern aesthetics or because their lack of eloquence excludes them from mainstream narratives. This monopolization of skills not only severs the diverse sources of craftsmanship but also transforms intangible cultural heritage transmission from a form of inclusive cultural sharing into cultural capital monopolized by a select elite. It undermines the grassroots, symbiotic ecosystem inherent to folk handicrafts.

4.3. Over-commercialization and the hollowing out of cultural meaning

Excessive commercial packaging has led to a crisis of cultural misinterpretation and the hollowing out of symbols. In today's era where traffic reigns supreme, Mud Cuckoos is often brutally stripped from its cultural context within Yellow River civilization to pander to curiosity or lowbrow tastes. Some developers exploit only its cute and retro surface symbols, recklessly altering its deeper cultural meanings, such as fertility worship and disaster avoidance, and even designing vulgar, culturally unethical forms to grab attention. This dehistoricized cherry-picking reduces Mud Cuckoos to shallow cultural-creative fodder, stripping it of its weighty historical memory and ethnic sentiment to leave only a commercial shell pandering to the vulgar. When consumers encounter these over-packaged symbols, they no longer see the spirit of a land and its people, but a hollowed-out landscape reshaped by commercial logic^[10]. This severing of cultural roots is more terrifying than the loss of craftsmanship itself, for it fundamentally cuts off humanity's capacity for dialogue with the land and with history.

5. The sociological significance of craftsmanship

The evolution of the Mud Cuckoos is not merely a chronicle of technical refinement, but a microcosm of sociological transformation. When we revisit the rebirth of this handful of yellow earth, we discover it has transcended its material form, achieving a profound leap from rustic plaything to instrument of social action. The rebirth of craftsmanship no longer manifests in intricate layering of molding techniques, but in how inheritors use clay as a medium to keenly engage with the torrent of social change and respond to the spiritual challenges posed by the times. Each reconstruction of the Mud Cuckoos form represents an artisan's intervention and dialogue with modern life. It is no longer merely a static exhibit, but a vibrant medium that activates community memory and mends fractured human connections.

At a deeper level, the essence of this inheritance practice lies in the human modernization achieved by rural artisans amidst the march of modernity. The transformation of inheritors' roles is not merely a change in identity labels, but a soul-stirring awakening of subjectivity. They are no longer relics cast aside by modernity, but rather individuals who proactively embrace modern civic virtues. They forge together the ancient wisdom of revering and learning from nature, rooted in agrarian civilization, with the innovative spirit and contractual ethos of contemporary society. This fusion enables traditional artisans to maintain their cultural roots while gaining the capacity and confidence to engage in equal dialogue with modern civilization. Thus, they undergo a metamorphosis from artisans to cultural citizens.

However, we must clearly recognize that confirming the identity of social innovator is not the end point, but rather an open starting point. The vitality of intangible cultural heritage lies in its eternal fluidity, in its constant collision

and interaction with social realities. The future of Mud Cuckoos will not be frozen in any single perfect form; it will continuously generate new meanings through the ongoing interplay between its inheritors, society, consumers, and the environment. Much like the flowing waters of the Yellow River, which maintain their clarity and vitality only through ceaseless surging and turbulence, Mud Cuckoos will continually unleash its unique cultural vitality within this dynamic evolution. It stands as the finest testament to the enduring vitality of traditional Chinese craftsmanship in modern society.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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