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A Study on the Inheritance and Transformation of Meihua Stake Martial Arts—A Case Study of Yan Zijie's School

Huichun Wu

Yunnan Normal University, Kunming, China
17853952380@163.com

Abstract. Meihua Stake Martial Arts regards "Using the Illusory to Convey the True" as its core inheritance philosophy. Its intergenerational transmission heavily depends on long-term, high-density bodily interaction as well as fictive kinship ethics between masters and disciples. When the inheritance venue moves from traditional rural communities to modern universities, this inheritance model encounters systematic challenges. Taking Yan Zijie, the 17th-generation inheritor of Meihua Stake, and his university inheritance network as research objects, this paper conducts research on the five-stage morphological evolution of Meihua Stake Martial Arts on the basis of long-term participant observation and in-depth interviews. This study finds that the key to living inheritance does not lie in replacing inheritance itself with institutional rules, but in maintaining a dynamic balance between "institutionalization" and "bodily embodiment".

Keywords: Meihua Stake, Master-disciple inheritance, University venue, Bodily perception and comprehension

1. Introduction

The master-disciple inheritance of traditional martial arts is an intergenerational reproduction mechanism integrating skills, culture, ethical norms and bodily practice. As the social foundation supporting inheritance changes, how to sustain and transform the inheritance mechanism has become a dilemma for the protection of martial arts. Starting from the 1980s, Yan Zijie, the 17th-generation inheritor of Meihua Stake and a professor from the Department of Mathematics of Shandong University, introduced this martial art into universities. After nearly forty years of development, a nationwide network of university societies has taken shape. Its inheritance model has undergone complex evolution from the traditional master-disciple system to society-based communication, and further to institutional adaptation. Various tensions emerging in this process provide valuable empirical cases for understanding the creative transformation of traditional martial arts in modern society. The author has practiced Meihua Stake at Shandong Normal University since 2019 and became a 19th-generation disciple through an initiation ceremony in 2024, participating in training, intensive camps and ritual activities of university Meihua Stake societies in a long-term and immersive manner. Against this background, this paper targets the university inheritance network of Meihua Stake centered on Yan Zijie. It explores the morphological evolution and internal tensions of the inheritance model during the venue transition from rural areas to universities, and discusses the

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balance between "institutionalization" and "bodily embodiment" in the living inheritance of traditional martial arts.

2. Meihua Stake Martial Arts

Originally named Meihua Fist, Meihua Stake got its name because practitioners trained on one hundred wooden stakes. In modern times, practitioners mainly train on the ground, so it is also called "Ground Meihua". Meihua Stake first originated and flourished in rural areas across northern China, including Hebei, Shandong and Henan provinces. Its cultural ecology of dual Cultural and Martial Arenas was built upon this specific rural community foundation. It is a unique cultural system that unites culture and martial arts, bonded by kinship and geographical ties and rooted in an agricultural society. This system integrates cultural inheritance, martial arts training, moral education and community cohesion. It consists of the Martial Arena for physical and combat training, and the Cultural Arena that guides practitioners to cultivate temperament and pass down sect rules as well as martial ethics. Thanks to its profound cultural heritage and unique value, Meihua Stake has been listed as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage of China. Training groups of Meihua Stake spread all over the country. Relying on the standardized inheritance model of "one master with multiple disciples", the art has basically maintained stable content and clear sect generations.

2.1. Rural society: The community foundation of Meihua Stake Martial Arts

The origin and spread of Meihua Stake Martial Arts are deeply rooted in traditional rural societies in northern China.

Meihua Stake is closely linked to central North China covering Hebei, Shandong and Henan. In the early days, most practitioners were farmers who practiced martial arts at village entrances, courtyards and farmlands during farm slack seasons. Traditional rural society featured a slow pace of life and limited information flow. In such an environment, martial arts served not only as a means of self-defense and physical fitness, but also as an important carrier of community entertainment, social cohesion and cultural inheritance. Farmers had little demand for developing mental agility and wisdom, and they practiced martial arts mostly out of habit, interest and the need to keep fit. Many senior Meihua Fist practitioners living in rural areas enjoyed good health, quick reflexes and sharp minds after long-term training. The theories of Meihua Fist were passed down through oral instruction and recitation of boxing classics. As a reinforcement mechanism for village beliefs, Meihua Fist fostered shared faith and strengthened the internal cultural cohesion of villages.

2.2. The cultural ecology of integration of culture and Martial Arts

Since its public dissemination, Meihua Stake has adopted a dual organizational structure of Cultural Arena and Martial Arena, with the Cultural Arena leading the Martial Arena. The Cultural Arena takes charge of preserving sect classics and generational genealogies, educating disciples to abide by sect rules and martial ethics, and guiding all activities of the sect with theoretical doctrines. The Martial Arena focuses on the teaching and practice of martial skills. In the past, learning and teaching Meihua Fist in rural areas followed stricter requirements and procedures. Disciples usually needed years of training in the Martial Arena and long-term assessment by senior practitioners and masters to prove their morality and conduct before they were allowed to enter the Cultural Arena and learn theoretical doctrines.

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The Cultural Arena is the soul of Meihua Stake Martial Arts. Its guiding ideology absorbs the essence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, draws wisdom from *The I Ching*, and integrates strategies from *The Art of War*, forming a complete and profound theoretical system known as the "Wordless True Scripture" [1]. The Cultural Arena has three core functions. First, it guides all training activities in the Martial Arena with its theories. For instance, it explains boxing variations with concepts including Yin-Yang and Five Elements, Tai Chi Principles and Primordial Qi. Second, it disciplines disciples to follow sect rules and martial ethics, such as the prohibitions on betraying masters and ancestors, bullying the weak and seeking hegemony. It stresses respect for teachers and unity among practitioners. Third, the Cultural Arena also carries out spiritual practice, namely cultivating spirit and vital energy to refine internal elixirs, which complements the martial training in the Martial Arena. In addition, the Cultural Arena enshrines ancestral masters (including a female second-generation ancestor) and holds rituals for ancestor worship and disciple initiation to strengthen collective identity and spiritual cohesion.

The Martial Arena is the foundation of Meihua Stake. It imparts the full content of Meihua Stake Martial Arts, including basic stances, combined routines, twisting routines and weapon techniques, and delivers rigorous and systematic physical training. The ultimate goal of training in the Martial Arena is not merely to acquire combat capabilities, but to cultivate mental agility and develop wisdom through martial practice. "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice" is the essence of Meihua Stake. It means reshaping one's mental state through physical movement, which is entirely different from the mind-cultivation methods adopted by Buddhism and Qigong that rely solely on mental regulation.

The Cultural Arena guides the Martial Arena, and the Martial Arena safeguards the Cultural Arena. The Cultural Arena provides theoretical, spiritual and moral guidance, while the Martial Arena puts forward the spirit of theories through physical practice. The ultimate pursuit of Meihua Stake Martial Arts lies in "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice". All insights and perceptions of the integrated principles of culture and martial arts are gained from practical martial training. The two arenas are inseparable, with the Cultural Arena leading the Martial Arena as an integrated whole.

2.3. The inheritance model of one master with multiple disciples

Like most traditional martial arts, Meihua Stake adopts the master-disciple inheritance model where one master teaches multiple disciples. Masters conduct long-term and comprehensive assessments on applicants, adhering to the principle that "Those who lack faith, integrity, benevolence and courage are not qualified to learn martial arts and combat theories". The assessment covers personal temperament, moral character, physical aptitude, learning motivation and comprehension. Only practitioners who meet the standards in martial skills and personal conduct after years of assessment can become formal inner-circle disciples through initiation ceremonies.

In terms of teaching content, masters not only instruct disciples in martial techniques, but also regulate their personal morality. As a combat-oriented traditional martial art, Meihua Stake mainly adopts daily sparring guidance as the core teaching method, featuring hand-in-hand and one-on-one physical tutoring. Meanwhile, the cultivation of martial ethics is a process of moral enlightenment based on Confucian ethics, which shapes disciples' temperament through knowledge acquisition and practical conduct [2]. The teaching process involves comprehensive considerations of technical systems, ways of thinking and etiquette norms. It is not only a transmission of professional knowledge, but also a process of cultural edification and dependent cultivation intertwined with emotional bonds and ethical norms [3]. A disciple's social identity, status within the sect and even

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part of their life path are closely linked to their master. Masters hold extensive disciplinary power over disciples, including moral evaluation and life guidance.

2.4. The inheritance philosophy of Using the Illusory to Convey the True

"Using the Illusory to Convey the True" is the core methodology and fundamental principle of Meihua Stake practice, as well as an epistemology concerning how physical knowledge is passed down across generations. Its core connotation is that all tangible boxing routines and fixed rules are "illusory", serving only as tools and means. Practitioners temper their bodies and train their minds through these tangible "illusory" methods, and ultimately gain genuine health, wisdom, combat capabilities and the profound state of martial arts beyond fixed forms, which is the "true essence". Simply put, genuine bodily perception cannot be fully conveyed through language or videos, and it must rely on long-term one-on-one physical interaction between masters and disciples. Language and images can never fully describe personal physical experience, and all genuine perceptions become "illusory" the moment they are visualized. This core theory has been followed by Meihua Stake for generations. Any reform of its inheritance system must be questioned: whether it can meet the requirements of "Using the Illusory to Convey the True". If institutional innovations reduce the time and space required for bodily perception, such progress will come at a price.

Overall, the original social soil of Meihua Stake Martial Arts was the agricultural society in rural northern China. The cultural ecology of dual Cultural and Martial Arenas developed on this foundation forms a self-sustaining living cultural system mainly based on master-disciple inheritance. Guided by the Cultural Arena and practiced through the Martial Arena, this system integrates cultural inheritance, moral education, martial training, spiritual cultivation and wisdom development. Its core lies in transforming profound traditional culture into personal physical experience and inner wisdom of practitioners via "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice", so as to elevate people's overall spiritual realm. Amid current social changes, this cultural ecosystem is undergoing transformation and reconstruction as it expands from rural areas to towns, campuses and other diverse venues.

3. Meihua Stake Martial Arts among intellectual elites

The traditional inheritance system of Meihua Stake has formed a complete and self-sufficient cultural ecology for traditional martial arts. Starting from Han Qichang, this ecology experienced its first profound transformation of social venue. Rooted in rural society, Meihua Stake entered Peking University, marking a historic shift toward intellectual elites. In this period, fundamental changes took place in its communication approaches, audience composition and teaching concepts, laying a solid foundation for the later spread of Meihua Stake across university systems nationwide.

3.1. Han Qichang and the first transformation of inheritance venue

Han Qichang, the 16th-generation inheritor of Meihua Stake, settled at Peking University in the mid-1930s and worked as a martial arts professor there. His disciples were no longer rural farmers, but university students of Peking University. His teaching was characterized by combining physical movements with recitation of formulas and explanation of boxing theories. For example, when teaching the state of "tranquility", he required disciples to follow the rule of "Remain motionless when the opponent stays still, and act ahead when the opponent makes the slightest move", and pointed out that this aligns with the strategy of "striking after the opponent yet gaining the initiative"

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recorded in *The Art of War*. This teaching method that combined boxing with traditional culture and military strategies greatly attracted university students. Since then, Meihua Stake Martial Arts began to gain popularity among top intellectual groups in China.

Professor Yan Zijie is the most representative figure in this venue transformation, and his life experience stands for the transition of Meihua Stake from rural areas to universities.

Born in 1936, Yan Zijie was an orphan. Suffering from malnutrition, he developed heart disease in his first year at Peking University and had to suspend his studies. During his leave, he met Master Han Qichang and began to learn Meihua Stake to recover his health. After six months of intensive training, he made a full recovery. He also showed outstanding learning ability and completed his studies with excellent academic performance. More importantly, he was deeply attracted by the profound cultural connotations behind Meihua Stake. He realized that Meihua Stake was far more than mere martial routines, but a form of culture and science. Thanks to his excellent martial skills and personal cultivation, he became the 17th-generation inheritor of Meihua Stake through an initiation ceremony. In 1982, Yan Zijie was transferred to work at the Department of Mathematics of Shandong University. In 1984, responding to students' requests, he took the post of president of the Martial Arts Association of Shandong University and officially launched the public and voluntary dissemination of Meihua Stake in universities. Shandong University thus became the birthplace and core base for the university-based spread of Meihua Stake [4].

3.2. The development of Meihua Stake in universities

Yan Zijie's martial teaching at Shandong University soon expanded to surrounding regions and the whole country, forming a thriving development pattern driven by core bases.

From 1984 to 1990, student societies of Meihua Stake centered on Shandong University gradually expanded to almost all universities in Jinan, including Shandong Normal University, Jinan University and Shandong Jiaotong University, forming a circle of Meihua Stake societies among Jinan universities. In 1988, international students at Shandong University started to learn Meihua Fist, kicking off its international dissemination. In 1990, Yan Zijie and Professor Lu Yao introduced Meihua Fist at the International Academic Symposium on the Origin of the Yihetuan Movement, and led more than forty Chinese and foreign historians to watch performances in Guangzong County. From then on, Meihua Fist gained fame at home and abroad. Starting from 1990, Meihua Stake societies were successively established in universities in Weihai, Qingdao, Yantai, Linyi and other cities in Shandong, as well as in major cities including Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou and Hangzhou. After more than thirty years of cultivation, thousands of Meihua Stake disciples who graduated from universities have spread this martial art around the world.

University Meihua Stake societies have cultivated a large number of well-rounded social elites with sound physical and mental health. Meanwhile, they have endowed this ancient folk martial art with modern scientific connotations, helping it take root among intellectual groups and spread Chinese culture to the world. Professor Yan Zijie published numerous monographs including *Five-Style Meihua Stake* and *The Comprehensive Principles of Culture and Martial Arts of Chinese Meihua Stake*. He also explained boxing theories in modern language on platforms such as Aerial Classroom, making remarkable contributions to the modernization of Meihua Stake theories.

3.3. Development models and characteristics of Meihua Stake in universities

The university environment has shaped a development model for Meihua Stake that differs greatly from its forms in rural areas and private martial arts schools.

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In terms of communication forms, it features society-based operation and voluntary teaching. Traditional rural master-disciple system was highly exclusive, with strict rules on generational seniority, sect disciplines and admission requirements, and masters were extremely cautious about accepting new disciples. By contrast, Han Qichang and Yan Zijie adopted an open and voluntary communication model via university societies accessible to all students, breaking the barriers of the traditional master-disciple system and greatly expanding the audience of Meihua Stake. Yan Zijie always insisted that Meihua Stake is a form of culture and science in universities, rather than a commercial product or competitive event. He explicitly opposed excessive commercialization or simplification of Meihua Stake into competitive routines. He believed that the number of martial arts schools or competition championships were empty reputations and could not cultivate real talents. The daily training, weekly intensive sessions, vacation training camps, outdoor activities on festivals, inter-university exchanges and campus performances constitute the daily life of Meihua Stake societies. These activities conform to the open, inclusive and free nature of student societies while retaining the inherent characteristics of Meihua Stake, and foster a strong "family culture" within university Meihua Stake groups.

In terms of personnel composition, practitioners are highly educated and well-qualified. In rural areas, most practitioners were farmers with limited educational background, and they practiced martial arts mainly for physical fitness and self-defense. Profound theoretical doctrines were passed down merely through oral instruction. After Meihua Stake entered universities, its practitioners became college students, who are the future elites of society. Equipped with strong logical thinking, scientific literacy and learning ability, they created unprecedented conditions for interpreting Meihua Stake systematically from empirical experience to theoretical knowledge and from traditional mysticism to modern science.

The tradition of "All Meihua Stake practitioners are one big family" has been well inherited. University Meihua Stake has formed a nationwide network of student societies transcending regional boundaries. Disciples from different universities treat each other like brothers and sisters. They can recognize fellow practitioners by exchanging basic routines and discussing theoretical doctrines, which builds a strong sense of belonging and cohesion.

The training principle of "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice" has been upheld. His personal experience at Peking University made Yan Zijie realize that Meihua Stake is more than martial training; it is a scientific way to cultivate mental agility and develop wisdom. He summarized this philosophy as "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice", which means training and regulating the mind via physical exercise. Therefore, the teaching goals of Meihua Stake no longer focus merely on combat skills, but also on developing wisdom, improving comprehension and nurturing talents, which fits well with the social demand for comprehensive and innovative talents in modern times. Yan Zijie pointed out that university students practice Meihua Stake with clear purposes: to train mental agility, develop wisdom and improve comprehension, so as to boost academic study and future work. He reformed traditional training methods to adapt to the university environment, such as increasing the proportion of training methods like Safa and Dragonfly Skimming the Water, and emphasizing training modes such as "sudden movement" and "Practise as if opponents are present even when training alone" that directly exercise the mind. Such reforms greatly improved training efficiency and students' interest, injecting strong vitality into Meihua Stake in universities.

The development of Meihua Stake in universities represents a successful modern transformation led by Professor Yan Zijie on the basis of Master Han Qichang's efforts. He turned Meihua Stake from a secret folk martial art in rural areas into an open and scientific discipline in universities, with

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the core goal of "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice" and wisdom development. Today, starting from Shandong University, Meihua Stake has taken root in more than a hundred universities across China and spread to the whole world, presenting a splendid landscape of "rooted in campuses and blooming worldwide".

4. Meihua Stake Martial Arts with fictive kinship bonds

Fictive kinship refers to the imitation, replication and expansion of blood relations. Parties involved use kinship terms, maintain intimate bonds similar to family members, and undertake mutual assistance obligations. The master-disciple relationship of Meihua Stake is incorporated into the ethical framework of blood kinship. A full set of kinship titles such as "master" and "master's wife" are adopted, and the Confucian notion of "A teacher for a day is a father for a lifetime" is observed, forming a typical fictive kinship structure. Both sides enjoy intimate bonds like family members and bear the obligation to help each other. The large-scale promotion of Meihua Stake via university societies has greatly expanded its audience, yet inevitably diluted the intensive bodily practice and strict ethical ties required by the traditional master-disciple system. Nevertheless, Yan Zijie's outstanding physical demonstration ability and personal charisma have maintained the fundamental solemnity of the inheritance system, forming a unique transitional form based on fictive kinship.

4.1. The shift of master-disciple relationships

University Meihua Stake societies have retained the master-disciple inheritance model. Students who have practiced in societies and wish to take formal discipleship can become official disciples after assessment and initiation ceremonies with Yan Zijie. Meanwhile, students who choose not to become formal disciples can continue practicing in societies. Adhering to the philosophy of teaching all who come to learn, Yan Zijie never treats students differently based on whether they have taken formal discipleship or not. Under such circumstances, it is impossible to replicate the traditional way of masters and disciples staying together day and night among Yan Zijie and his numerous disciples. A small group of core disciples maintain extremely close bonds with him just like father and son, while the majority of ordinary disciples share a relationship similar to that between teachers and students in university elective courses. Two titles, "master" and "teacher", are used among different groups of disciples.

4.2. The dilution of intensive bodily immersion

In the traditional model, disciples stay with their masters for years or even decades, receiving daily sparring guidance and personal instruction, fully immersed in the atmosphere of martial arts practice. Tacit knowledge, a concept put forward by British physical chemist and thinker Michael Polanyi in 1958, refers to individual cognitive experience that cannot be fully expressed through language and symbolic systems. It is usually passed down through informal channels such as the master-disciple system. The combination of oral instruction and sparring guidance between traditional Meihua Stake masters and disciples is a typical form of tacit knowledge transmission, and long-term bodily immersion serves as the basic condition for passing on tacit knowledge.

The university society model has brought fundamental changes in this regard. Students prioritize academic studies, and martial arts training is merely an after-school activity with limited time. Training is often interrupted or even terminated during vacations and after graduation. Faced with a large number of students, Yan Zijie has far fewer opportunities to provide one-on-one sparring

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guidance than traditional rural masters. This not only weakens interpersonal intimacy between masters and disciples, but also triggers epistemological risks. When long-term one-on-one bodily interaction is compressed, the basic conditions required for tacit knowledge transmission are systematically undermined. Not all disciples will inevitably decline in skill level as a result. Those with high devotion, natural talent and active learning attitude can still achieve a high proficiency, yet their progress relies more on personal efforts rather than systematic support from the inheritance system.

4.3. Peer instruction: Adaptation and compromise

Peer instruction means senior disciples teach junior ones on behalf of the master. Those who deliver training are regarded as senior peers rather than formal masters, and all practitioners enjoy equal status and generational standing. The university society model, which is student-led and features high personnel mobility, has popularized and stabilized this teaching mode. This leads to a key change: the authority of skill instruction is partially separated from generational seniority. For example, a newly joined senior disciple with high comprehension and solid skills may provide more effective guidance than senior practitioners with longer training experience. Sometimes, students feel closer to the senior peers who teach them regularly than to the formal master. This weakens the absolute rule of "respect for seniority" and injects more equality and vitality into the inheritance system.

4.4. The maintenance of Yan Zijie's personal authority

As the university inheritance network of Meihua Stake expands and the master-disciple relationship evolves into a transitional form of fictive kinship, Yan Zijie's personal physical demonstration and charisma act as a safety net to sustain the entire inheritance system. His personal authority is the core of inheritance in this stage.

First and foremost, Yan Zijie himself is an outstanding martial arts practitioner. His physical presence enables the continuation of traditional oral and physical instruction in modern universities. His demonstrations, sparring guidance and face-to-face advice have irreplaceable value that no written or verbal description can match, which echoes the training logic of "Using the Illusory to Convey the True". As long as Yan Zijie is present in person, disciples can directly perceive the "true essence" of Meihua Stake even in a society system with diluted bodily immersion. It is this vivid embodiment of authentic skills that attracts disciples to follow him.

Apart from superb martial skills, Yan Zijie's image as a moral model consolidates the emotional bonds within the group. He has devoted decades to voluntary martial teaching and treated all students equally, which exerts powerful moral influence. His selfless dedication is particularly valuable in a commercialized society, establishing his image as a strict yet caring master in the hearts of disciples.

Relying on Yan Zijie's charismatic authority, the university inheritance system of Meihua Stake has retained the orthodoxy and solemnity of the traditional master-disciple system. However, the inheritance of Meihua Stake in universities is highly dependent on Yan Zijie's physical presence and personal charisma. This is a typical form of personal authority rather than institutional authority. When this irreplaceable leader with extraordinary martial skills, legendary life and noble character passes away, the inheritance system will face a huge risk of rupture. Faced with this hidden danger, it is necessary to explore the deeper institutional design of Meihua Stake inheritance: the Three-Tutor Mentorship System.

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5. Meihua Stake Martial Arts under the Three-Tutor Mentorship System

The Three-Tutor Mentorship System is a unique master-disciple inheritance system of Meihua Stake, which was officially implemented when the first group of 19th-generation disciples took initiation oaths in July 2024. The three tutors refer to the Guiding Tutor, Guarantee Tutor and Leading Tutor. The Guiding Tutor is mainly responsible for introducing disciples to martial practice and delivering regular training. Due to personal arrangements and the peer instruction system, Guiding Tutors can also be senior disciples or person-in-charges of local universities and regional groups. The Guarantee Tutor is generally tasked with imparting theoretical doctrines and regulating disciples' moral conduct, and sometimes acts as the tutor of the Cultural Arena. In practice, the division of duties is not strictly defined, and this position is usually taken by reputable tutors with excellent skills and morality but relatively younger age. The Leading Tutor is the formal master who delivers core martial training, always held by highly respected seniors with profound martial attainments.

The Three-Tutor Mentorship System disperses the comprehensive authority that was previously held solely by one master. It means the one-master-centered radial structure of Yan Zijie's era has evolved into a polycentric network structure of multiple masters and multiple disciples as inheritance responsibilities are transferred to the 18th-generation practitioners. The educational authority for the new 19th-generation disciples no longer derives from a single supreme master, but from a collective mentorship panel composed of peers with divided roles. This marks the transformation of authority operation from a radial central model to a collaborative polycentric network. The responsibilities and power of inheritance are shared and institutionalized within the same generation. While this structural differentiation brings vitality, it also carries potential risks of deconstructing core skills and traditional authority.

5.1. Structural risks: Polycentric networks and fragmented authority

When multiple 18th-generation practitioners obtain the qualification to accept new disciples and implement the Three-Tutor Mentorship System, the single inheritance center splits into multiple secondary centers represented by individual 18th-generation tutors. Influenced by their different training experiences, professional backgrounds and personal comprehension, each tutor may form unique understandings and preferences regarding Meihua Stake theories and techniques. In the absence of unified and compulsory teaching syllabi, such individual differences in inheritance are likely to generate diverse technical styles and training focuses among 19th-generation disciples, thus forming a polycentric inheritance network. From the perspective of martial arts inheritance, when the judgment standard for "authentic skills" is scattered among multiple tutors, who will define the real connotation of "Using the Illusory to Convey the True"? For the 19th-generation disciples, the standard of "true essence" becomes diverse. Although this can stimulate innovation and vitality, it also brings potential risks. Without a unified physical standard to judge which bodily perception is closer to the "true essence", the intergenerational inheritance fidelity of tacit knowledge cannot be guaranteed. In the long run, lacking effective integration, subtle branches may form within Yan's School based on different lineages, leading to the fragmentation of the original complete martial arts system.

In addition, under the radial central model, Yan Zijie's theories and practical skills served as the absolute core and ultimate standard. In the polycentric network model, however, the 19th-generation disciples have the closest daily contact and emotional bonds with their own Guiding Tutors or Leading Tutors. This may lead to a situation where disciples prioritize recognition of their direct

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tutors over in-depth study and acknowledgement of Yan Zijie's theoretical system. If the original source of inheritance is neglected and replaced by divergent interpretations from different branches, the overall orthodoxy and unity of inheritance will be fundamentally shaken.

5.2. Identity crisis: The erosion of community cohesion

With the division of different tutor lineages, practitioners tend to focus their activities and social interactions on their own master's groups. They may be more willing to participate in training camps and private exchanges organized by their own tutors, while showing little interest in activities held by other lineages. Such cliquish tendencies based on lineage affiliation meet the identity needs of small groups, yet gradually erode the overall community awareness of "All Meihua Stake practitioners are one big family". This crisis is an inevitable growing pain in the transformation of Meihua Stake inheritance from a traditional community to a modern network. It reveals that while pursuing wider dissemination and institutional innovation, maintaining the unity of martial skills, continuity of core authority and integrity of cultural identity has become a key issue concerning its long-term and sound development. This crisis does not negate previous transformations, but requires the inheritance system to develop new integration mechanisms and adaptive strategies to achieve sustainable development amid dynamic balance.

6. Resource-oriented Meihua Stake Martial Arts

If the Three-Tutor Mentorship System is an internal adjustment of the Meihua Stake inheritance system, integrating Meihua Stake into formal courses is another effort made by inheritors to obtain external resources and institutional legitimacy.

6.1. Incorporation into formal courses: Institutional demands for inheritance

Bringing intangible cultural heritage into campuses is a key measure to realize the innovative development and creative transformation of excellent traditional Chinese culture. Currently, there are three main approaches for ethnic traditional sports heritage to enter campuses. The first is curriculum integration, which incorporates traditional sports into compulsory or elective physical education courses. The second is society activities, where special-interest groups for ethnic traditional sports are established and guided by inheritors or professional teachers to carry out regular training. The third is competitions and performances, including holding campus sports meetings and cultural festivals for ethnic traditional sports, and organizing students to participate in off-campus performances and competitions to raise the influence and appeal of relevant events [5].

Although university societies are vibrant, they have inherent instability, as their operation relies heavily on core members and is restricted by the annual rotation of society cadres. By contrast, incorporation into formal courses means stable class schedules, dedicated training venues, formal teaching posts and academic credits. It is the most reliable way for inheritance activities to obtain sustainable resources and institutional legitimacy within the university system. To keep pace with policy orientation and development trends, many senior practitioners have explored ways to transform university Meihua Stake from society activities into formal courses. Some inheritors have launched Meihua Stake courses in primary and secondary schools or university physical education curricula. For example, Qingdao Huanghai University has offered Meihua Stake as an elective physical education course. Incorporation into courses brings obvious advantages: courses are open to all enrolled students, covering a wider audience than societies and lowering the access threshold

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for beginners. The compilation of standardized teaching plans also objectively promotes the systematic sorting of teaching methods. Meanwhile, the curriculum-based development of traditional martial arts also shows incompatibility with conventional teaching modes.

6.2. Structural conflicts between institutional logic and bodily perception

As mentioned above, the core of Meihua Stake inheritance lies in "Using the Illusory to Convey the True", namely bodily perception and comprehension, which requires long-term and uninterrupted physical training. When Meihua Stake is incorporated into university courses, it is governed by institutional logic, a modern educational model featuring standardization, quantifiable assessment and fixed class cycles. This model is efficient and legitimate in operation, yet it is based on a premise that knowledge can be divided into independent modules and delivered uniformly to different students by different teachers at different times. However, the core logic of Meihua Stake's "Using the Illusory to Convey the True" denies this premise. Genuine bodily perception cannot be standardized and coded, and it can only be generated through long-term physical interaction between masters and disciples. The conflict between the two sides is not a technical problem of teaching methods, but a structural contradiction between two different knowledge transmission logics. Under the standardized teaching model, limited class hours per semester and the termination of teacher-student relations upon course completion break the continuity required for bodily perception.

Furthermore, standardized assessments conflict sharply with the implicit nature of bodily perception. Bodily perception is a highly personalized implicit experience. Due to differences in physical conditions, comprehension and devotion, each practitioner makes progress at a different pace and shows different performance. Nevertheless, formal courses require standardized assessments as a necessary part of teaching procedures. Such assessments can only evaluate the "illusory" part, such as the standardization of movements and completion of routines, but fail to quantify students' inner bodily perception. As a result, both teachers and students tend to focus on the superficial "illusory" forms rather than genuine bodily comprehension. A typical example is exam proxy in the final assessment of the Meihua Stake elective course at Qingdao Huanghai University. It is clear that such students have gained no real bodily perception and even do not recognize the basic routines of Meihua Stake.

In addition, traditional sparring guidance requires one-on-one physical interaction between masters and disciples. Masters perceive disciples' strength, body balance and reaction through physical contact, so as to provide timely correction and guidance. In large-class teaching, teachers cannot provide such intensive individual guidance for every student. This most effective physical teaching method is either abandoned or reduced to symbolic demonstrations in pursuit of teaching efficiency, failing to exert its real effect.

6.3. The shift toward instrumental rationality in disciples' choice of tutors

The curriculum-based development of Meihua Stake leads to the same structural trend as the change of disciples' criteria for choosing tutors. After entering universities, disciples no longer learn from rural martial artists of similar social status, but from scholar-martial artists holding university professor titles. The master's social identity itself becomes a kind of symbolic capital. With more choices brought by the Three-Tutor Mentorship System, disciples' standards for choosing tutors have become diverse and practical. Apart from traditional factors such as admiration for tutors' martial skills and personal affinity, practical utility has become an increasingly important consideration. For instance, some disciples tend to choose tutors who share similar academic backgrounds or can

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provide guidance and resources for their further study and career development. There was once a law student who chose a tutor working as a lawyer. Such choices reflect that disciples regard the master-disciple relationship partially as usable social capital and learning resources. While this embodies the enhanced subjectivity and rational choices of disciples and is consistent with Yan Zijie's proposition that martial practice helps people better serve society, it also impacts the traditional ideal of learning from masters purely for the pursuit of martial arts and virtue. The master-disciple relationship has taken on new instrumental implications, with tutors acting as academic supervisors or career mentors.

As the inheritance venue is deeply embedded in the university system, both inheritors and disciples make rational choices following the same resource allocation rules. Developing formal courses is a strategy for inheritors to obtain institutional resources, while choosing tutors based on practical needs is a strategy for disciples to acquire social resources within the inheritance system.

6.4. Re-examining rationality: Functional differentiation between popularization and authentic inheritance

Curriculum development and resource-oriented choices are rational decisions made by inheritors for sustainable development within the university system. However, both choices lead to the same problem: as the institutional framework of inheritance increasingly adapts to modern university rules and the master-disciple relationship evolves into modern teacher-student or mentor-student relations, are the basic conditions for intensive, long-term and body-centered in-depth inheritance of Meihua Stake being systematically marginalized?

Formal courses target all students and perform the function of popularization that societies cannot achieve, enabling more people to get access to Meihua Stake, which is valuable for cultural inheritance. Transforming traditional experience into knowledge acceptable to modern education also corrects the tendency of mystification. Nevertheless, if "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice" is the core pursuit of Meihua Stake, the basic conditions for body-centered inheritance cannot be fully met within the framework of formal courses. This is not a problem caused by individual teachers' competence or teaching methods, but an inherent structural limitation of institutional logic. Courses can fulfill the task of popularization, but the mission of "conveying the true essence" — passing down genuine bodily perception to the next generation — relies on physical transmission between masters and disciples and has to be completed outside formal courses. The real risk does not lie in the existence of courses, but in taking courses as the only inheritance channel.

7. Conclusion

The core of Meihua Stake inheritance is "Using the Illusory to Convey the True", and the transmission of "true essence" depends on high-density, long-term bodily interaction as well as fictive kinship ethics between masters and disciples. When the inheritance venue shifts from rural areas to universities, this inheritance mechanism faces systematic challenges. Large-scale dissemination dilutes the intensity of bodily immersion and inevitably loosens master-disciple bonds. Yan Zijie's charismatic personal authority maintains the fundamental solemnity of inheritance, yet cannot solve the essential problem of non-heritable personal authority. The Three-Tutor Mentorship System transfers authority from individuals to institutions and avoids the rupture of inheritance, but brings new risks of fragmented authority and weakened group identity. As inheritance is further embedded into the university resource allocation system, the institutional

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framework adapts better to modern rules, while the channels for body-centered inheritance are at risk of being blocked. Since the institutional logic of formal courses cannot meet the requirements for body-centered inheritance needed to "convey the true essence", courses should not be assigned tasks beyond their capacity. Formal courses can take charge of popularization, while society-based in-depth training, individual master-disciple tutoring and regular intensive camps undertake the mission of passing down the true essence. Such division of labor can realize coordinated operation of different functions within one inheritance system.

The formation of polycentric networks is an irreversible structural trend, and the division of different tutor lineages is an inevitable accompanying phenomenon. Instead of preventing lineage division, the priority is to build a strong collective identity above all polycentric groups, namely a shared cultural core acknowledged by all disciples beyond differences in individual teaching styles. This cultural core includes the theoretical system and the core philosophy of "Cultivating the Mind through Martial Practice" systematically interpreted by Yan Zijie, regular cross-lineage intensive camps and ancestor memorial rituals, as well as the collective belief of "All Meihua Stake practitioners are one big family" that transcends lineage boundaries. Maintaining a strong sense of community cannot rely merely on ethical slogans, but also needs institutional carriers. Cross-lineage training camps, collective study of classic documents and online communication platforms are all institutional means to integrate scattered small groups into an imagined community.

From "Using the Illusory to Convey the True" to institutionalized inheritance, the development path of Meihua Stake represents a typical experience of traditional martial arts seeking survival and development in modern society. Its evolution proves that the true vitality of martial arts inheritance does not exist in standardized teaching plans, but resides in tangible and heartfelt bodily communication between people. The key to living inheritance is to maintain a dynamic balance between institutionalization and bodily embodiment: institutions shall protect and support inheritance, rather than replace it entirely.

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