

Sustainable Development of Intangible Cultural Heritage Values: A Case Study of Chinese Nuo Opera

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Abstract: As the most important vein of cultural legacy, intangible cultural heritage contributes new cultural thinking and cultural innovation to the growth of cultural creativity in today's society. However, the current state of intangible cultural heritage sustainability is deplorable. While laws and strategic plans for conserving intangible cultural assets have been implemented in several countries and areas, the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage still requires more in-depth refining and research. Based on the Chinese intangible cultural heritage, Nuo opera, the key research issue in this study is how are the values of intangible cultural heritage being developed sustainably to investigate the sustainable conservation and development of intangible cultural heritage. The main research approach is documentary research and the means that exist today for the transmission and protection of intangible cultural assets, such as Nuo opera, to examine the profound meaning of its development and protection. The most important thing for the sustainable protection of intangible cultural heritage, according to this study, is the identity of its culture, as well as the various values brought by the sustainable development of this cultural heritage, including but not limited to economic value, social value, cultural value, and other important factors. Intangible cultural heritage development must pay more attention to its own cultural values as well as the political elements and economic development needs in the current context, not just to preserve the heritage for the sake of development, but to continuously keep up with the times and dig deeper into its spirit and spiritual core.

Keywords: cultural creativity, intangible cultural heritage, sustainable development

1. Introduction

In 2003, UNESCO introduced the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which encompasses five main categories: traditional oral expressions, the language that carries the vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, festivals, and rituals; traditional crafts and craftworks; and practices and knowledge of the natural world [1].

Intangible cultural heritage is an integral part of cultural heritage, constantly innovated and passed on from generation to generation by different communities in response to their environment, interaction with nature, and changing historical conditions. It is passed on from ancestors to descendants to give them a sense of identity and history, thereby contributing to cultural diversity and human creative activity [1]. However, ongoing societal change is eroding the transmission of intangible cultural heritage and its associated values.

Cultural heritage is tied to the identity, sense of belonging, rituals, historical ownership, and stewardship of local people and communities; therefore, local communities and individuals must protect cultural heritage. Effective management and development by local communities contribute to the most important aspect of sustainable cultural heritage development.

Culture should provide communities with strengths and distinctiveness, but in many communities, the increasing monetization of intangible cultural assets is being disrupted by new worries and issues from beyond their local realm [2].

Nonetheless, the study revealed that the spiritual and social qualities that intangible cultural heritage gives to local communities and individuals are rarely mentioned and given little consideration. In light of this, it is even more crucial to consider how to maintain and sustainably develop intangible cultural heritage.

Since the early 1980s, China's rapid economic growth and profound social transformations have significantly transformed the role of popular religion in contemporary Chinese politics [3].

In addition, through the study of Marxist-influenced schools of thought, Nuo opera has transformed from an informally recognized religious tradition hostile to the socialist political system and atheist worldview to a politically favored "living fossil" of primeval culture [3].

This study will investigate the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage values through the following research topics, utilizing the case of Chinese Nuo opera, Bourdieu's cultural capital, and Throsby's cultural heritage values as a theoretical framework.

1.1. Research Question

Main question:

How are the values of intangible cultural heritage being developed sustainably?

Sub-questions:

1. How are the values of intangible cultural heritage manifested and in which areas are they mainly highlighted?
2. What are the key implications for the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage?

1.2. Chinese Nuo Opera

In northern China, witchcraft (Wu) is referred to as shamanism, while in southern China, it is called Nuo. Nuo, an ancient Chinese religion and the Chinese skill of magic, forms the origins of Nuo opera. It is renowned as an exorcism ritual in the history of Chinese theater's origins and evolution and is also a crucial element in the interaction between Chinese theatre and ritual [4].

The People's Republic of China and the State Council accepted the inclusion of Nuo opera on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006 [5].

Nuo is a complex religious belief and custom, with different branches of Nuo opera schools in different areas and regions of China. It is primarily popular in the ethnic minority regions of southwest China today [3], but it holds significant cultural value and influence on local communities and individuals.

Masks representing a multitude of facial expressions and emotions are a distinguishing feature of Nuo opera, and it is believed that Nuo masters are the representatives of the spirits [6].

The link between ritual and drama has been an important, contentious, and intricate topic in the study of drama and performance. The exorcism ritual known as Nuo is essential to the interaction between ritual and theatre in China during the origins and development of Chinese theatre [4]. This is one of the major factors that has enabled Chinese Nuo opera to survive the ravages of history and not be abandoned.

However, when intangible heritage is accepted alongside natural and cultural heritage, it has begun to challenge some of the more central principles of the authorized heritage discourse, especially its emphasis on materiality, innate meaning, expert opinion, and the importance of source communities.

2. Literature Review

Using Chinese Nuo opera as an example of intangible cultural heritage, this study explores the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and local communities and individuals, as well as the sustainability of its cultural values. The literature review will focus on the impact of Nuo opera's intangible cultural heritage on local communities and individuals, and how the values of this heritage are currently being protected.

2.1. The Local Impact of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage possesses two intrinsic characteristics. The first characteristic is the deep-rooted interdependence between intangible cultural heritage and tangible cultural and natural heritage. The second characteristic is its close connection to self-identity and ongoing recreation. The identity and culture of the creators and bearers of intangible cultural heritage are profoundly linked, and this link depends on the unity of their self-identity and the irreplaceable nature of the intangible cultural heritage.

Intangible cultural heritage relies on its processes, knowledge, expressions, capacities, as well as the cultural places and associated products, which are considered constitutive of cultural heritage [7]. Chinese Nuo culture has undergone continuous development and adaptation throughout history, transitioning from feudalism to modernity. It serves as an important bridge to the development of cultural values within a region.

Heritage is a vital element contributing to the identity of a nation or region and the preservation of culture. It influences urban identity, individual identity, and image, and can be seen as a reflection of the patterns and behaviors of dominant local communities within a larger society. Cultural heritage is influenced by technological, demographic, and economic changes, and its inherent vulnerability allows for active transformation and modification [8].

Intangible cultural heritage acts as a bridge between past, present, and future, facilitating the preservation and transformation of social structures through diverse experiences and transcendence [7].

In this study, the term “community” refers to geographically contiguous individuals who share a common culture, set of values, or social status, as proposed by Pacione [9]. From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage values, the sustainability of cultural heritage values will be analyzed in the region where Chinese Nuo opera is recognized as an intangible cultural heritage item.

2.2. Intangible Cultural Heritage, Values, Identity

The concept of “shared symbolic property” is an important aspect of cultural heritage, enabling a place to establish a regionally distinctive local identity. It is suggested that cultural heritage not only conveys its own cultural values but also enhances cultural impact, fostering increased local pride and strengthening identity.

Traditionally, economists have recognized three forms of capital: physical capital, human capital, and natural capital. This study proposes a fourth type of capital, cultural capital, which represents capital embodying cultural values [10].

Local land capital or development, rooted in cultural values, can be experienced and enjoyed by both local residents and tourists, resulting in positive economic, social, and environmental effects [11]. These cultural values reflect the authentic and irreplaceable aspects of local culture.

The key elements of intangible cultural heritage include the self-identity generated by this heritage, its continuous reproduction in accordance with historical and social development, and its inseparable link to the cultural identity of relevant communities. It is authentic and closely related to the human rights of these groups [12].

Intangible cultural heritage is alive and adaptive, reflecting the cultural progress of a society. It encompasses a wide range of values, including the groups involved, the objects used, the methods employed, and different discourses [7].

Heritage plays a significant role in a country's identity and representation, reproducing values and their meanings. It can be seen as a manifestation of a specific social symbol [7].

Identity theory, according to Terry, has developed a core perspective that considers the self as a multidimensional and organized construct, reflecting society. Identity is a complex representation, influenced not only by language, gender, nation, and race but also by the relationship between individuals and groups within communities [13].

Within the Nuo opera community, there are three types of identity: family clan identity, geo-identity, and ethnic identity. The alignment of identity with a specific place undergoes historical changes, and the influence of local memory on the identity of Nuo opera artists varies in different historical scenarios, both conventionally and unconventionally [14].

The expansion of geo-relations enhances the geo-identity of Nuo opera artists. As Nuo opera activities differentiate into ritual and performance, the geo-relations established through these activities continue to expand [14].

The most rigorous geo-relations that maintain the identity of Nuo opera are derived from the value of Nuo opera performances by local people. This represents an important components of its inseparability as an intangible cultural heritage.

3. Theoretical Framework

An arts economist by the name of Throsby defines six main cultural values that can be contributed to individuals as well as societies by cultural heritage. These values include aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic, and authenticity values. In addition, a variety of these values' characteristics are dissected in great detail in terms of the possible advantages they present to people as well as societies.

Bourdieu, who posited numerous sorts of capital, including cultural, economic, social, symbolic, and educational capital, embraced the notion of "capital" that Marx had established in the course of his research on capitalism socialism. Marx had first proposed the idea of "capital" in his study of capitalist socialism. According to Bourdieu, these many forms of capital are frequently transferred through the processes of cultural creation, education, and taste. Because of the unequal distribution of these capitals, there is inequality in terms of people's consumption, interests, and lifestyle choices. According to Bourdieu [15], despite the fact that members of the new middle class have high levels of education and the potential to amass class capital, they may lack cultural capital and cultural distinctions. An affinity for a specific culture can lead to the establishment of a new social class as well as a sense of aesthetic preference. Cultural capital reproduces elite positions through cultural assets such as artifacts and knowledge.

In the instance of Chinese Nuo opera as an example of intangible cultural heritage, its one-of-a-kind "tastes" are unmistakable, encapsulating the specific geographical characteristics of the area as well as the particular importance of human civilization. In spite of this, progress toward developing this intangible cultural asset has been hampered by a variety of impediments in recent years.

This study makes use of Throsby's cultural values of heritage in order to conduct an analysis of the value that intangible cultural heritage, such as Chinese Nuo opera, can bring to the table in terms of contributing to cultural legacy. In addition to this, it makes use of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to investigate the reasons why the value of intangible cultural heritage ought to be developed in a manner that is environmentally responsible.

4. Hypothesized Findings and Critical Analysis

Another intrinsic characteristic of intangible cultural heritage is its close association with self-identification and ongoing recreation. There exists a profound relationship between the identity and culture of the creators and bearers of intangible culture.

The Nuo opera rites were frequently performed in front of large audiences, serving as a unifying force for the community. Nuo experts entertained both gods and humans through dramatic performances that involved wearing masks, with the performers assuming the roles of disguised gods.

Efforts have been made by officials to promote visually captivating Nuo opera rites for tourists, as well as the production and sale of Nuo opera masks and other Nuo opera-themed items. However, these performances and goods alone do not provide a permanent solution. Prior to these developments, Li [16] mentioned the cultural significance of Nuo opera as a means of healing and fostering communal togetherness. Furthermore, the tradition of Nuo opera itself faced the risk of extinction as young people prioritized prospects in migrant labor over the opportunity to train as Nuo masters.

opera has improved due to strategies developed by its practitioners independently of national tourism programs. These strategies include charging higher fees for rituals, which increases the likelihood of training young people under the guidance of masters and continue the tradition [16].

Why is Nuo opera, as an intangible cultural heritage, experiencing a decline in the number of individuals passing down the tradition? What are its essential principles, and why is it necessary to sustainably develop these values? Are the existing methods of protecting and passing on Nuo opera effective, positive, and worthy of promotion? How can it be developed more sustainably?

4.1. The Cultural Values of Chinese Nuo Opera

According to Throsby [10], the manifestation of human behavior is an essential part of culture, both in its functional and constitutive sense. Therefore, something possesses cultural worth if it contributes to these shared aspects of the human experience. The aesthetic value, spiritual worth, social value, historical value, symbolic value, and authenticity value of cultural heritage benefit individuals and communities. Among these, the historical values of cultural heritage are the most easily recognizable. In the following discussion, I will explore the distinct aesthetic, spiritual, and social values of Chinese Nuo opera as an intangible cultural legacy.

The Nuo masks in Nuo opera, carved from camphor wood and painted in various colors to represent different characters, possess a strong ethnic flavor and visual impact, showcasing the unique physical and cultural beauty of intangible cultural craft products [17].

From the perspective of traditional Chinese folk culture, each Nuo opera can be seen as a vivid and colorful folklore painting. Although Chinese Nuo operas have different regional variations, they are closely intertwined with local characteristics and unique folklore, becoming an integral part of folklore events [18].

Chinese Nuo opera holds significant cultural value in various ways. Firstly, it provides insights into disciplines such as religion, ethics, history, folklore, and dialectology that are otherwise difficult to find in general literature. Secondly, it embodies the cultural spirit of a place. Thirdly,

with its abundance of folk tales and historical legends, it serves as a rich source of material for contemporary literature and art. Lastly, many of its artistic expressions are worthy of consideration and inspiration for contemporary theater [18]. The cultural importance of Nuo opera permeates every aspect of local culture.

The spirit of the culture expressed in Nuo opera is deeply rooted because the creators of Nuo opera are individuals who live within the culture of the region. With limited exposure to external influences and minimal interaction with the outside world, their concepts, language, and behavior reflect the culture of the region. By observing the Nuo opera they compose and perform, one can gain an understanding of their regional culture [17].

As one of the early members of China's official list of intangible cultural heritage, Nuo opera is irreplaceable, and its cultural significance is undeniable. As demonstrated above, it showcases the unique value of intangible cultural heritage in various ways.

Thorsby suggests that culture acts as a common value and belief that unites people, and the social value of a cultural phenomenon can be observed through its contribution to social stability and community cohesion. The social value of Chinese Nuo opera emerges from people living in different regions, adapting to the constant changes and development of society. The evolution and development of Nuo opera from ancient times to the present, along with its distinctive regional cultural values, reflect the pulse and mark of different times. It is essential to respect, protect, and develop such a cultural and spiritual value.

4.2. Taste, Cultural Capital, and Chinese Nuo Opera as Intangible Cultural Heritage

According to Bourdieu [15], cultural capital refers to the collection of valued characteristics, trends, and “tastes” within a particular culture. While Bourdieu primarily focuses on society as a whole, it is still applicable to investigate the formation of culture in regions where aesthetic, spiritual, and social values hold specific meaning.

Chinese Nuo opera, as an intangible cultural heritage, not only represents a local traditional drama but also serves as a foundation for understanding and studying historical and cultural development. It provides valuable insights into the characteristics of ethnic groups such as the Miao, Tujia, and others, traditional customs, ethical concepts, and outstanding ethnic cultures. Furthermore, it can be seen as a new cultural “taste” that has evolved through historical lineage. Thorsby suggests that culture, in its functional and constitutive sense, serves as a manifestation of human behavior. Therefore, something holds cultural worth in a broad sense if it contributes to these shared aspects of the human experience.

The unique regional “taste” and the connotations of cultural capital associated with Chinese Nuo opera make the people and places living in the local area an integral part of its continuous development. This highlights the significance of protecting and sustainably developing the core cultural values of Nuo opera.

4.3. Sustainable Development and Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage

According to David Thorsby, social capital developed through social interaction networks overlaps with “one form of intangible cultural capital, the concept of cultural systems, as shared cultural networks and relationships that facilitate cultural, social, and economic interactions between group members.” This concept allows us to understand the importance of combining the cultural qualities of intangible cultural assets like Nuo opera with local cultural influences. Nuo opera holds value as a manifestation of “cultural, social, and economic” aspects that deserve preservation.

As a living human asset, the study, training, and transmission of intangible cultural heritage should be based on the unique qualities of each heritage, as emphasized by Kim [19]. However,

public organizations must support and guide ICH practitioners through their policies and guidelines. To ensure sustainability, both ICH associations and bearers should have a well-developed system for attracting and training new bearers, thereby enhancing the income prospects associated with ICH.

In Guizhou province, digital preservation efforts for Nuo culture have begun, involving university-trained scholars and local specialists. Additionally, there are several small local museums or exhibition halls, as well as province-wide museums, contributing to the preservation, protection, and development of Guizhou's Nuo culture. Despite the absence of international collections and the majority of their collections consisting of local Nuo cultural artifacts, these institutions play a vital role.

The Nuo culture of Guizhou has flourished alongside the recognition and conservation of national and provincial intangible cultural treasures. It has found its place in modern society's growth through activities such as craft development, tourism development, urban planning, cultural performances, integration into education, and museum exhibits. By expanding the display area, modifying expressive forms, and merging constituent materials, Nuo culture has surpassed the limitations of its conventional form and function, showcasing its multifaceted significance in contemporary society [20].

Notably, these protection and development measures for Nuo culture are specific to the southwestern region of Guizhou province. In other regions with branches of Nuo culture, regional organizations and associations are actively involved and invested in the protection and transmission of cultural values through Nuo opera, implementing measures that are appropriate to their local contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study has focused on Nuo opera, a Chinese intangible cultural heritage, as a case study to assess its cultural worth and its impact on the local community. The research aimed to explore why the cultural values of Nuo opera and its sustainable development should be safeguarded. By examining its local geographical significance, identity, and unique cultural value, the study delved into the reasons why this cultural asset should be more effectively promoted.

Based on Throsby's theory of the cultural worth of heritage and Bourdieu's theory of capital as the overall theoretical framework, the study demonstrates that Chinese Nuo opera holds significant spiritual and social merits. It is deeply intertwined with the local cultural geo-relationship and has evolved through various historical eras. Through an extensive review of existing literature on the sustainability of Chinese Nuo opera, the research provides insights into the importance of preserving its cultural values and explores avenues for better sustainable development.

In conclusion, Chinese Nuo opera serves as an invaluable intangible cultural treasure with immense cultural significance for the local community. The study highlights the need for multi-level approaches to ensure the sustained growth of its cultural value. While recognizing the undeniable historical value of intangible cultural heritage, it is crucial to integrate its irreplaceable cultural values and social contributions into a comprehensive development system. Furthermore, future considerations should take into account the diverse components of intangible cultural heritage resources within different cultural and political contexts. By focusing on each component of intangible cultural heritage, a clearer and more specific approach to sustainable development can be achieved.

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