

# Research on the Path of Intangible Cultural Heritage Empowering Rural Revitalization: A Case Study of Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance

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**Abstract:** *The comprehensive advancement of the rural revitalization strategy has provided a historic opportunity for the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and also raised a theoretical inquiry into how ICH can effectively empower rural development. Taking Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance as the research object, this paper explores the path of ICH empowering rural revitalization from the theoretical perspective of Marxist view of culture and Chinese thoughts on rural construction. The study finds that Human Dragon Dance, as an important carrier of Lingnan culture, contains multiple potentials of collective memory cohesion, cultural subjectivity construction and social capital reproduction. However, in the process of modernization, it is confronted with structural dilemmas such as the compression of cultural ecological space, the rupture of inheritance mechanism, insufficient industrial transformation capacity and weakened cultural governance function. This paper proposes that ICH empowering rural revitalization should transcend the instrumental thinking of “resource utilization”, establish the practical logic of “value co-creation”, and realize the deep coupling of ICH protection and rural revitalization through reconstructing value cognition system, innovating talent development scheme, optimizing cultural ecosystem, activating industrial development momentum and embedding primary-level governance structure, so as to ultimately serve the overall goal of the modernization of agriculture and rural areas.*

**Keywords:** Intangible Cultural Heritage, Rural Revitalization, Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance, Cultural Empowerment, Marxist View of Culture.

## 1. Introduction

The rural revitalization strategy is a major policy initiative adopted in China in the new era to address the “issues relating to agriculture, rural areas, and rural people”, and to speed up the modernization of agriculture and rural areas. The report to the 19th National Congress put forward the general goal: “thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity”. The report to the 20th National Congress further stressed that comprehensively promoting rural revitalization is an essential requirement for achieving the “Two Centenary” Goals. The implementation of this strategy bears on the all-round revitalization of businesses, talent, culture, ecosystems, and organizations in the countryside. More fundamentally, it raises a core question: in the process of modernization, how can the cultural roots of rural areas be preserved? And how can farmers’ spiritual homeland be rebuilt?

From the perspective of traditional culture, rural revitalization aims to preserve the “roots” and “soul” of the Chinese nation. As a living form of fine traditional Chinese culture, ICH constitutes a key resource for addressing this issue. As noted in *Talks at the Forum on Literature and Art Work*, “Fine traditional Chinese culture is the spiritual lifeline of the Chinese nation” [1], and rural areas are where this lifeline is most deeply rooted. In 2021, the national document *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage* clearly stated the need to “further encourage local ICH to support rural revitalization” [2], providing policy guidance for the integrated development of ICH and rural revitalization.

As a practical proposition, the connotation of ICH empowering rural revitalization is not self-evident. Current academic research mostly remains at the functionalist level of

“how ICH resources serve rural areas”, focusing on economic dimensions such as industrial development and tourism integration, while paying insufficient attention to deeper issues such as how ICH participates in the reconstruction of social relations in rural areas, restructuring of cultural order and improvement of governance capacity. This narrow research orientation reflects a more fundamental theoretical dilemma: what paradigm should be adopted to understand the relationship between ICH and rural revitalization? Is it an instrumental relationship of “utilizing and being utilized”, or a value-based relationship of “mutual construction” and “symbiosis”?

To address this question, we need to draw inspiration from the theoretical resources of the Marxist view of culture and Chinese thoughts on rural construction. Marxism has long emphasized the reaction of culture on the economic base, holding that advanced cultural concepts can exert “a tremendous leveraging effect” on social development. In its long-term practice of rural construction, China has taken cultural revitalization as an integral part of rural development, forming the valuable experience of “shaping people and villages through culture”. Marx’s dialectical exposition that “social being determines social consciousness” and “social consciousness possesses relative independence” reveals the mechanism by which culture, as part of the superstructure, reacts on the economic base. His discussion of “the law of beauty” in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* highlights the cultural creativity unique to human practice, distinct from animal instinct [3]. The historical evolution of Chinese rural construction thought, from “balancing urban and rural development” to “building a beautiful countryside”, has consistently regarded cultural revitalization as an indispensable dimension of rural construction. These theoretical resources provide important methodological guidance for reinterpreting the internal

mechanism of intangible cultural heritage empowering rural revitalization.

Inspired by the above theories, this paper constructs a five-dimensional interactive analytical framework of “value – subject – ecology – business – governance”. This framework holds that ICH empowering rural revitalization is not a single economic development process, but a systematic project covering value reconstruction, talent training, ecological restoration, industrial drive and governance embedding. Value cognition is the premise. Only by fully recognizing the multiple values of ICH in rural revitalization, the awareness of protection and utilization can be developed; Successive talent training is the key. The living inheritance of ICH depends on “human beings” as carriers, and rural revitalization also needs strong support from local talents; Cultural ecology is the foundation. The survival and development of ICH cannot be separated from specific cultural spaces and social environment. Thriving businesses is the starting point. The transformation of ICH’s economic value can inject endogenous impetus into rural development. Primary-level governance is the guarantee. The social norms and organizational wisdom contained in ICH can effectively improve rural governance capacity. These five dimensions are interrelated and mutually supportive, jointly forming the practical path of ICH empowering rural revitalization. Based on this framework, this paper takes Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance as a case to explore the path selection of ICH empowering rural revitalization.

## 2. Cultural Genes and Contemporary Situation of Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance

### 2.1 Human Dragon Dance from the Perspective of the Lingnan Culture

Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance originated in Dongshan Town, Donghai Island, Zhanjiang, Guangdong, with a history of more than 400 years. As a unique dance form that forms a “dragon” by humans, Human Dragon Dance is not only an important carrier of the Lingnan culture, but also a living representation of the Chinese nation’s psychology of “worshiping dragons”. From the perspective of cultural geography, the formation of Human Dragon Dance is closely related to the multi-integration Lingnan culture.

The Lingnan culture is an organic part of the Chinese culture. The integration of agricultural culture and marine culture endows it with unique national cultural genes. Through historical evolution, the Lingnan culture has developed its own unique features—inclusiveness, openness, pragmatism, and innovation. It also bears the marks of dynamic integration and interaction of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Legalism, and other schools of thought. As an important pillar of the Lingnan culture, Cantonese culture (“Guangfu culture”) covers Guangdong and the Pearl River Delta, characterized by the Cantonese language [5]. The cultural temperament on which Human Dragon Dance depends is vividly reflected in its artistic form. It constructs the image of “dragon” with “human beings” as carriers, breaking through the performance paradigm of traditional dragon dance relying on props, reflecting the cultural character of the Lingnan people who “resist the temptation and dare to innovate”.

There are various folk sayings about the origin of Human Dragon Dance. According to research, Human Dragon Dance took shape in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties and prevailed during the Emperor Qianlong’s and Emperor Jiaqing’s reign. According to folk legend, it originated from inspiring the Ming army, formed by rearranging comprehensive performances of folk acrobatics and martial arts into “Human Dragon Dance” [4]. The performance is dynamic and well-coordinated, with functions of celebrating festivals and harvest, paying tribute to deities and ancestors, praying for peace and entertaining people and gods. It has a deep mass foundation and is deeply loved by people. Every autumn harvest season, people spontaneously organize dragon dance teams, wear festival costumes, and perform Human Dragon Dance accompanied by musical instruments, creating a grand and lively scene [5].

The symbolic meaning of Human Dragon Dance is multi-layered. At the surface level, it is a folk activity to celebrate harvest and pray for peace, carrying wishes of people living on the coast to respect and tame natural forces. At the deeper level, it is a ritual expression of collective memory. Through physical dancing, villagers transform the national identity of “descendants of the dragon” into perceptible and experiential physical practice. From the perspective of artistic characteristics, Human Dragon Dance “transforms fullness into emptiness”, reasonably converting the “fullness” of body posture and the “emptiness” of dragon charm, achieving the artistic state of “unity of form and spirit, interplay of emptiness and fullness” [5]. This process of virtual-real transformation is precisely the process of cultural meaning reproduction.

### 2.2 Artistic Characteristics and Cultural Value of Human Dragon Dance

Human Dragon Dance is named because its “dragon” shape is completely formed by humans without props, which is its unique feature. Structurally, Human Dragon Dance can be divided into “dragon head”, “dragon body” and “dragon tail”. The dragon body consists of groups of adults and children based on the scale. During the performance, bare-feet and bare-shoulder dancers run quickly, with the formation in an “S” shape. It is compact when the number is small, and it can reach hundreds of people when large, creating a spectacular scene [6].

The costumes of Human Dragon Dance performers are quite distinctive. The “dragon leader” wears a blue Zhongshan-style jacket and trousers, a red cloth around the waist, a blue headscarf with a red velvet ball on the forehead, and holds a long pole to guide the dragon team. Adult dancers wear yellow waistcoats and shorts, yellow headscarves with red gauze and bead decorations on the forehead. Children wear red bellybands and shorts decorated with yellow grids, and red silk cloth tied on legs, just like sparkling dragon scales [5]. This costume system not only enhances visual effects of the performance, but also carries rich cultural symbolic significance.

The cultural value of Human Dragon Dance is reflected in multiple dimensions. As a living representation of the “dragon” culture among the Chinese nation, it carries the spiritual

sustenance of hundreds of millions of Chinese people; As a typical representative of the Lingnan marine culture, it reflects the cultural wisdom formed by people who live on the coast in interaction with the marine environment; As an important carrier of collective memory about communities in the countryside, it maintains emotional bonds and cultural identity among villagers through annual performance practices. Human Dragon Dance integrates people's various wishes, condenses the national consciousness of "descendants of the dragon", and makes people have special feelings for dragon dance [6].

### **2.3 Dilemmas of Cultural Ecology and Inheritance Mechanism in the Context of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection**

Under the impact of modernization, Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance is facing an unprecedented survival crisis. Field investigations reveal the following dilemmas:

The compression of cultural ecological space has become the most pressing problem. Human Dragon Dance was originally a folk activity embedded in a specific time-space rhythm, usually performed during the autumn harvest season with ancestor worship rituals, deeply connected with the production and life cycle of rural society. With the outflow of population in rural areas and changes in production and lifestyle, this traditional temporal rhythm and spatial field have been severely disrupted. A large number of young and middle-aged laborers in Donghai Island go out to work, leaving the elderly and children, so it is difficult to organize large-scale dragon dance teams. The ritual sense of traditional festivals is fading, and the number of Human Dragon Dance performances has decreased from dozens per year in the past to only on major festivals now.

The rupture of inheritance mechanism is equally severe. Human Dragon Dance has high requirements for performers' physical fitness and skills. Adult dancers need to bear children and run quickly on the beach barefoot; Children need good balance and coordination. The inheritance highly depends on inter-generational "physical teaching" because of this high-intensity physical practice. Under the background that "leaving the land and hometown" is common, the physical connection between the younger generation and local culture is cut off, which makes the traditional "master-apprentice" model unsustainable. There are very few old artists who can fully master the routines and ritual norms of Human Dragon Dance. The age structure of inheritors is seriously aging, with most inheritors over 50 years old and few under 40 years old [12].

Insufficient economic motivation also poses a constraint. As a spontaneous folk activity, Human Dragon Dance has long lacked stable funding sources. After being selected as a national-level ICH, governments at all levels have provided certain financial support, but these funds are mainly used for subsidizing inheritors and implementing activities, which are difficult to support industrial development and sustainable development. Relying solely on government subsidies cannot solve the long-term problem of ICH inheritance. The lack of self-sufficiency capacity is one of the key factors restricting the development of Human Dragon Dance.

Deviation of social cognition has further exacerbated the dilemma. With the diversification of modern entertainment methods, the younger generation's enthusiasm for participating in traditional folk activities is gradually declining. In Donghai Island, most young people only "have heard of" Human Dragon Dance, and few can fully tell its historical origin and cultural connotation. This fault in cultural cognition has reduced the attraction of Human Dragon Dance among young people, further exacerbating the inheritance dilemma.

## **3. Theoretical Logic of Intangible Cultural Heritage Empowering Rural Revitalization**

### **3.1 Reconstruction of Cultural Subjectivity: From Protection to Co-creation**

The deep logic of ICH empowering rural revitalization lies in reconstructing rural subjectivity through cultural practice. For a long time, ICH protection has mostly followed a top-down path: government recognition, expert evaluation and special fund support. Although this model has effectively curbed the rapid disappearance of ICH, it is easy to "objectify" ICH, making it an "object" to be protected and developed rather than a living practice actively participated and continuously created by villagers [11].

Marxist view of culture enlightens us that culture is ultimately the product of the social practice of the people. Marx pointed out that "the masses are the makers of history"—a proposition equally applicable to the cultural sphere. The living inheritance of ICH cannot only rely on external "blood transfusion", but also needs to stimulate the "sufficiency" ability of villagers as cultural subjects. The historical experience of Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance shows that only when villagers regard Human Dragon Dance as "our own culture" rather than "protected object" can it truly thrive. Therefore, ICH empowering rural revitalization should realize the paradigm shift from "heritage protection" to "value co-creation". Villagers are not only "holders" of ICH, but also "subjects" of ICH value reproduction. The meaning of ICH is not unilaterally defined by external experts, but constantly reinterpreted and activated in villagers' daily practices.

### **3.2 Conversion of Cultural Capital: Mutual Construction of Society, Economy and Symbolism**

The concept of "cultural capital" proposed by French sociologist Bourdieu provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding the ICH empowerment mechanism. As a special form of cultural capital, ICH has multiple potentials to transform into economic capital, social capital and symbolic capital [12].

In terms of economic capital, Human Dragon Dance can create employment opportunities and economic benefits for rural areas through cultural tourism integration and cultural and creative development. In terms of social capital, the rehearsal and performance of Human Dragon Dance itself is a reproduction of social networks, requiring close cooperation, mutual trust and shared responsibility among villagers. This experience of "organizing" can effectively enhance the cohesion and self-organization capacity of rural society. In

terms of symbolic capital, as a national ICH, Human Dragon Dance can win social recognition and identity for rural areas, which can be further transformed into “soft power” to attract external resources and promote rural development.

One of the valuable experiences of Chinese thoughts on rural construction is being good at transforming cultural resources into practical forces for development. As proposed in *On Coalition Government*, promoting the “Chinese national spirit” requires “seeking a solution from among the people” [7]. This enlightens us to give full play to the multiple values of ICH as “cultural capital” in the practice of rural revitalization, and promote the positive interaction and mutual construction among different forms of capital. For example, by building the Human Dragon Dance cultural brand (that is to accumulate symbolic capital), attracting tourists to watch and experience (that is to transform economic capital), then enhancing the cooperative relationship and identity among villagers (that is to reproduce social capital), forming a sound circle of cultural empowerment for rural revitalization.

### **3.3 Endogenous Development: Cultural Driving Force of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

The theory of “endogenous development” emphasizes that truly sustainable rural development must be based on the rural own resource endowments and cultural traditions, rather than simply transplanting external models. First proposed by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the 1970s, its core meaning emphasizes the subjectivity, locality and sustainability of development [12]. ICH is precisely the most “local” and “irreplaceable” cultural resource in rural areas, which can provide differentiated competitive advantages and cultural driving forces for rural revitalization.

The case of Human Dragon Dance fully illustrates this point. As a unique cultural form “with no equivalent elsewhere”, Human Dragon Dance constitutes the most recognizable cultural symbol of Donghai Island in Zhanjiang. If this cultural uniqueness can be effectively developed and disseminated, it can be transformed into “cultural magnetism” to attract tourists, gather talents and stimulate vitality. Moreover, the spiritual temperament of “solidarity and cooperation, dogged determination” contained in Human Dragon Dance is highly consistent with the struggling spirit and collective consciousness needed for rural revitalization. When this spiritual temperament is activated and integrated into rural development practice, it can become an endogenous driving force for rural transformation [10].

## **4. Practical Paths for Intangible Cultural Heritage to Empower Rural Revitalization**

### **4.1 Value Reconstruction: Enhancing Multiple Value Cognition**

The primary premise of ICH empowering rural revitalization is the systematic understanding of ICH value by all subjects. At present, there is a general tendency of “valuing economic value over cultural value” and “valuing immediate utilization over long-term inheritance” in practice. This one-sided value cognition may not only lead to excessive commercialization

of ICH, but also obscure its deep functions in uniting people, educating the masses and cultivating rural customs.

Improving value cognition requires the joint efforts of the government, society and inheritors. The government should integrate ICH protection and rural revitalization into a unified policy framework, reflect the comprehensive consideration of ICH’s multiple values in project planning, capital investment and assessment, establish an ICH value evaluation system which incorporates cultural value, social value and ecological value into assessment indicators to avoid taking economic benefits as the sole evaluation criterion. At the social level, universities and colleges, research institutions and media should give full play to their roles, presenting multi-dimensional cases and theoretical logic of ICH empowering rural revitalization through academic research and public communication. Inheritors should break through the narrow positioning of “skill inheritance” and consciously assume the role of cultural interpreters and value communicators, so that villagers and tourists can not only “see” the wonderful performance of Human Dragon Dance, but also “understand” its cultural connotation and spiritual pursuit [4].

### **4.2 Talent Cultivation: Innovating Inheritance and Training Mechanism**

Talents are the core of living inheritance of ICH and the key support for rural revitalization. In view of the aging and serious generational gap of Human Dragon Dance inheritors, there is an urgent need to build a multi-level and multi-channel talent training system.

Improving the identification and incentive system of ICH inheritors is fundamental to bridging the talent gap. On the basis of continuing the identification of nation-level and province-level representative inheritors, we should explore the establishment of a multi-level inheritor system at municipal, county, town and village levels, bring more “folk masters” into the protection vision, appropriately increase the subsidy standards for inheritors, explore an incentive mechanism linking subsidies with inheritance performance, and stimulate the enthusiasm and creativity of inheritors [8][9]. Promoting the in-depth integration between ICH inheritance and the national education system is to cultivate cultural identity in the long run. In primary and secondary schools, school-based curriculum and experience activities of Human Dragon Dance can be developed to let students feel the charm of local culture in physical practice. In view of the outflow of young labor forces, we need to innovate the inheritance mode of “master-apprentice”, such as exploring the “migratory inheritance” mode, carrying out intensive teaching activities during the Spring Festival and farming seasons, or using digital technology to carry out “cloud teaching” to break the restrictions of time and space on inheritance.

### **4.3 Ecological Restoration: Optimizing Cultural Ecological Space**

The survival of ICH cannot be separated from a specific cultural ecological space, which includes physically village pattern and performance space, socially ritual systems and festival traditions, as well as psychologically cultural identity

and emotional belonging [11].

Optimizing cultural ecology first requires protecting the physical space on which ICH depends. For Human Dragon Dance, its traditional performance venues include grain-sunning grounds in the village, sand beaches on the coast and open spaces in front of temples, which are both physical and meaningful spaces. In the process of rural construction, large-scale demolition and construction that damage such spaces should be avoided. Meanwhile, combined with human settlement improvement, places with cultural memory functions should be consciously preserved and renovated [10]. At the same time, we should actively restore and reconstruct the ritual systems and festival traditions embedded in ICH. Human Dragon Dance was originally a folk activity “embedded” in specific time nodes, closely linked with rituals such as ancestor worship and harvest celebration. In the process of modernization, although these ritual traditions are difficult to fully restore, they can be creatively transformed under the premise of respecting the logic of contemporary life. For example, combining Human Dragon Dance performances with new festivals such as the “Chinese Farmers’ Harvest Festival” to endow traditional performances with new era connotations. It is also indispensable to create a social atmosphere conducive to ICH inheritance. Through media publicity, community education and cultural activities, enhance villagers’ sense of pride and sense of belonging to local culture, make “mastery of Human Dragon Dance” a desirable “cultural capital”, and attract more young people to take the initiative to participate in inheritance practices.

#### **4.4 Industrial Drive: Activating Economic Empowerment Potential**

The transformation of ICH’s economic value is an important step for empowering rural revitalization, but this transformation must follow the principle of “protection first, rational utilization” to avoid excessive commercialization eroding the authenticity of ICH [13].

For Human Dragon Dance, industrial drive can be carried out in multiple paths. First is to build “Human Dragon Dance Plus” cultural-tourism integrated products. That means combining Human Dragon Dance performances with ecological sightseeing on the island, folk experience, study tours and other formats and designing differentiated tourist routes and experience projects, which helps to extend tourists’ stay time and enhance consumption depth. Second is to develop Human Dragon Dance-themed cultural and creative products. By designing clothing, accessories, household goods, digital collections and other derivatives around its visual symbols and cultural images, the industrial chain can be extended and added value can be enhanced. Third is to promote the normalization of “intangible cultural heritage entering scenic spots”. That means establishing stable cooperative relations with surrounding tourist attractions, and embedding Human Dragon Dance as a regular performing project into scenic spot operation, which can not only provide stable performance opportunities and economic income for inheritors, but also enhance the cultural connotation and attractiveness of scenic spots.

Industrial development should take community benefit as the fundamental orientation, rather than pursuing the maximization of short-term economic benefits. We should explore to establish an interest linkage mechanism among cooperatives, inheritors, and rural households to ensure that the incremental gains from industrial development are shared by ordinary villagers. rather than being seized by external capital. We should also establish a monitoring and evaluation mechanism for protecting ICH, and timely intervene and adjust once commercialization is found to damage the authenticity of ICH.

#### **4.5 Governance Embedding: Promoting Rural Cultural Governance**

The deep value of ICH empowering rural revitalization lies in that it can provide cultural resources and organizational wisdom for rural governance. The rehearsal and performance of Human Dragon Dance itself is an “organized” practice, requiring close collaboration of dozens or even hundreds of villagers, clear division of labor and command system, and compliance with rules and commitment to responsibility. This experience of “learning to cooperate in doing things” is precisely an important resource for rural governance capacity building [10].

Embedding ICH into rural governance can be carried out in multiple dimensions. Exploring governance wisdom in ICH resources, the organizational logic of “the dragon head leads, and all joints follow” contained in Human Dragon Dance is highly consistent with the concept of “Party building leads, and diverse parties participate” in rural governance. We can learn from its organizational experience to explore a new rural governance model of “Party members demonstrate, the masses participate” [12]. Cultivating social organizations with ICH activities as the carrier, we can support the establishment of villagers’ self-organizations such as Human Dragon Dance associations and training institutes. Regular activities enhance interaction and trust among villagers, laying a social capital foundation for rural governance. Integrating ICH inheritance with rural civilization construction, the traditional virtues such as solidarity and cooperation, hard work, respect for the elderly and care for the young carried by Human Dragon Dance can be transformed into educational resources for changing customs and cultivating rural customs through performances and lectures. Learning from the “orderly culture” in ICH to promote rule of law construction in the countryside, the awareness of rules and order contained in ICH can be combined with the spirit of modern rule of law to enhance villagers’ legal awareness and sense of rules [11].

### **5. Conclusion**

ICH empowering rural revitalization is both a practical and theoretical proposition. Taking Zhanjiang Human Dragon Dance as a case, this paper reveals the internal logic of ICH empowering rural revitalization. It is not an instrumental process of “resource utilization”, but a systematic project involving value reconstruction, talent training, ecological restoration, industrial drive and governance embedding. Its deep goal is to reconstruct rural subjectivity through cultural practice. This study provides a new theoretical perspective for

understanding the relationship between ICH and rural revitalization, and also provides practical reference for the coordinated promotion between local ICH protection and rural development. How to realize the empowerment value of ICH on the premise of protecting its authenticity remains to be tested by more case studies.

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