

Safeguarding Intangible Heritage: The Baishou Dance and Community Resilience in Western Hubei

Wenbin Shan¹, Xinyue Dai²

¹ School of Ethnology and Sociology, Hubei Minzu University, Enshi, Hubei, China

² School of Art Education, Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Wuhan, Hubei, China

Abstract. This paper examines the role of the Baishou Dance, a collective ritual of the Tujia people in Western Hubei, in fostering community resilience. As a significant intangible cultural heritage (ICH) practice, Baishou Dance transcends its artistic value to function as a vital social institution. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Laifeng County, this study investigates how the dance, through its ritual performances, collective narratives, and intergenerational transmission, strengthens social cohesion, reinforces cultural identity, and enhances the community's adaptive capacity in the face of modernization and social change. We argue that the safeguarding of Baishou Dance is intrinsically linked to the resilience of the Tujia community. The dance serves as a dynamic reservoir of cultural knowledge and social capital, enabling the community to navigate challenges while maintaining its cultural distinctiveness. The findings suggest that supporting such living heritage practices is not merely an act of cultural preservation but a crucial strategy for promoting sustainable community development. This case study offers broader insights for global ICH safeguarding efforts, highlighting the importance of community-based resilience as a key indicator of cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Baishou Dance; Community Resilience; Tujia People; Safeguarding; Cultural Sustainability.

1. Introduction

The Baishou Dance is a folk dance popular in the You River Basin on the southern slopes of the Wuling Mountains in China and is recognized as a national-level Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). As with the origins of many other Chinese folk dances, Baishou Dance originated from sacrificial rituals and later evolved toward labor-oriented expression. The main purpose of “reporting to the ancestors” was to recount the year’s “labor.” Over its long historical evolution, dance movements reflecting hunting culture and military activities have been lost, yet four fundamental features—stepping in sync, bending the knees, trembling, and sinking—have been preserved. These movements are rooted in the daily life and labor practices of the people of the Wuling region. The characteristic movement of stepping in sync in Baishou Dance shares similarities with the “same-side arm and leg” movements found in the dances of the Tibetan, Yi, Qiang, Miao, and Dai ethnic groups in China. At the same time, it exhibits the unique adaptability of the Wuling corridor’s intermountain spaces due to the distinctive mountain environment. As an embodied cultural practice represented by dance, Baishou Dance strengthens social capital and sustains cultural memory, thereby enhancing the community’s capacity to cope with internal and external pressures and providing indispensable endogenous motivation and resilient support for consolidating the sense of a shared Chinese national identity.

From ritual spaces to “ICH theaters”[1], from local narratives to transregional performances, and from collective memory to the shaping of community consciousness, the evolution of intangible heritage dance parallels the process of modernization and local narration. Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage, by “realizing multiethnic coexistence and mutual interaction through concrete practices”[2], responds to the explicit relationship between the grand historical narratives of “great traditions” and “small traditions” and local social memory. Approaches that “promote the mutual development of ICH practice and community building through social interaction”[1], and that “realize transformative innovation through diverse modes such as ‘ICH + tourism,’ ‘ICH + performance,’ ‘ICH + cultural creativity,’ and ‘ICH + towns (or neighborhoods)’”[3], aim to strengthen the

centripetal force of ICH by enhancing commonality and embracing diversity. Furthermore, “constructing ICH transmission and experience facilities to expand innovative homeland spaces” and “fostering a sense of home through shared ICH education and teaching”[4] serve as guiding principles for establishing a long-term, interactive mechanism between the ideal and the practical in ICH inheritance, safeguarding, and community resilience building.

2. Living Memory: The Baishou Dance as a Foundation of Cultural Identity

Amid the tide of modernization, communities gradually develop the capacity to resist disruptions and adapt to challenges while responding to changes in the natural and social environment—this capacity is known as community resilience. [5] Aslani and other scholars further point out that identity strengthens cohesion by enhancing the sense of belonging, while collective memory provides strategic support for crisis response through shared experiences. [6] Therefore, cultivating a shared consciousness—guided by community needs and centered on public participation—has become an important cultural path for enhancing community resilience. In this process, community art has been proven to strengthen social connections and improve intergenerational relationships. [7] For the Tujia people in the Wuling Mountains of China, the Baishou Dance serves precisely as such a “living” medium that gathers collective memory and shapes cultural identity, vividly demonstrating the practical power of folk art in building community resilience.

Firstly, Baishou Dance is a “visible history.” Its movements are not arbitrary creations but vivid simulations and artistic reproductions of ancestral migration, warfare, hunting, and agricultural life. Basic movements such as “single swing,” “double swing,” and “circular swing” simulate the hardships of crossing mountains and rivers; production movements like “sowing seeds,” “transplanting rice seedlings,” and “harvesting grain” reenact the entire process of agrarian civilization; while gestures such as “drawing the bow,” “shooting arrows,” and “celebrating victory” engrave the memories of warfare from the tribal era. Through annual collective performances, younger generations, in the embodied process of participation, subtly perceive, understand, and inherit their ethnic historical narratives. In doing so, they anchor their identity—“who we are”—amid the cultural homogenization risks brought by globalization.

Secondly, Baishou Dance is a “ritualized cohesive force.” Traditional Baishou Dance is closely connected to the ritual of worshiping the ancestral deity known as the “Eight Kings,” embodying a sacred dimension. This sacredness reinforces the community’s centripetal force. Through shared faith and ritual practices, individuals transcend the boundaries of family and clan to merge into a cultural community. The shared sense of ritual and common bodily language dissolve social barriers and cultivate mutual trust and belonging among members. This intrinsic connection rooted in deep cultural bonds constitutes vital social capital, enabling the community to stand united and act in concert when facing various crises.

3. Challenges of the Times: Transmission of Baishou Dance and Changes in Community Structure

However, like many other Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) projects, the Baishou Dance and the rural society on which it depends have faced unprecedented challenges in recent decades—challenges that directly test the resilience of the community.

Firstly, an endogenous crisis has emerged due to the “discontinuity” and “hollowing-out” of inheritors. The process of urbanization has drawn a large number of rural young and middle-aged laborers to work in cities, leading to “hollow villages.” This has resulted in a severe generational gap in the transmission of Baishou Dance. Many highly skilled elder performers are now advanced in age, while the younger generation—either living far from their hometowns for livelihood reasons or lacking understanding and interest in traditional culture—shows little enthusiasm for learning.

Consequently, the risk of “people leaving and the art disappearing” has become an urgent and tangible reality.

Secondly, the “hardening” and “fragmentation” of the cultural soil have led to the erosion of the transmission context. The diversification of modern entertainment forms has severely impacted traditional village-based cultural life. Television, mobile phones, and the internet now occupy most of people’s leisure time, and the Baishoutang (Baishou Hall), once the cultural center of the village, has lost much of its former appeal. The traditional and complete ritual process has been simplified and fragmented, blurring the cultural context of the Baishou Dance. Its profound spiritual connotations are at risk of being reduced to a mere form of “public square fitness dance.”

Lastly, the “transformation” of functional value and the impact of “commercialization” have led to the alienation of the dance’s intrinsic logic. With the rise of the tourism industry, the Baishou Dance has been brought to the forefront as an important cultural symbol showcasing Tujia customs. This development has undoubtedly provided new space for survival and generated economic benefits. However, excessive commercialization may also lead to its “specimenization.” In order to cater to tourists’ curiosity and fast-consumption mentality, the dance may be trimmed and adapted, losing its authenticity and sacredness. As a result, it risks shifting from an endogenous and spontaneous cultural practice to an exogenous and performative cultural commodity.

The discontinuity of inheritance, the erosion of cultural context, and the alienation of commercial logic together constitute the grave challenges that Baishou Dance must confront in contemporary society. In essence, these challenges reflect the loosening of cultural bonds and the loss of social capital within traditional communities amid rapid social transformation. How to address these challenges directly concerns whether the community can maintain its uniqueness and achieve sustainable development. Yet, these challenges have also spurred adaptation and innovation. Facing such crises, the Tujia communities on the southern slopes of the Wuling Mountains have not passively declined; instead, relying on their inherent cultural wisdom and cohesion, they have carried out a resilient and dynamic practice centered on the Baishou Dance, enabling it to gain renewed vitality amid the tides of modernization.

4. Dancing Resilience: Adaptation and Revitalization of the Baishou Dance in Times of Crisis

In the global process of modernization, the Tujia communities on the southern slopes of the Wuling Mountains in China have demonstrated a strong capacity for cultural adaptation. Rather than disappearing amid crises, the Baishou Dance has been endowed with new contemporary meanings through the multifaceted interactions among community, government, and market forces, becoming a key variable in activating community resilience.

Firstly, the Baishou Dance has become a “weaver” of social networks. In the face of population outflow, women, the elderly, and children who remain in the villages have become the main participants in Baishou Dance activities. In many villages across Enshi, Laifeng, and Xianfeng, spontaneously organized Baishou Dance teams have sprung up like mushrooms after rain. Each evening, familiar gongs and drums echo through the village squares, and people rebuild their social circles through collective dance practice and performances, forming new systems of mutual aid and support. These regular communal activities effectively alleviate the loneliness of the left-behind groups, enhance community cohesion, and ensure that “empty nests” do not become “empty hearts.”

Secondly, the Baishou Dance has become a “new stage” for empowering the community, especially women. In the traditional sacrificial context of Baishou Dance, women were not allowed to serve as drummers who controlled the rhythm. In modern performances, however, more and more female drummers have emerged. In many Baishou troupes, women play the roles of organizers and backbones. Stepping beyond traditional domestic roles, they find confidence and self-worth through participation in cultural activities. By engaging in performances, competitions, and even tourism-related events, some women have gained both income and social recognition, improving their status

within the family and the broader community. This empowering effect has inspired community members—especially vulnerable groups—to take a more active role in community affairs, injecting endogenous motivation into community development.

Thirdly, the Baishou Dance has become a “cultural bridge” connecting tradition and modernity. To address the younger generation’s sense of detachment, local governments and cultural departments have actively explored the model of “ICH entering campuses.” They have incorporated Baishou Dance into school exercise programs and invited folk artists to serve as extracurricular mentors, allowing children to develop a sense of intimacy with their local culture from an early age. Meanwhile, some visionary individuals have utilized new media platforms to produce short videos and documentaries about Baishou Dance, telling the stories behind the ancient dance in a modern narrative form. These efforts have successfully attracted the attention and participation of young people, achieving intergenerational continuity in cultural transmission.

From the perspective of community resilience, the function of the Baishou Dance has expanded from being an “art of a marginal ethnic group” to a form of “communal cultural capital.” This transformation reflects the community’s agency in enhancing cohesion through cultural adaptation, turning the dance from a regional symbol into a shared spiritual resource of the Chinese nation. The process vividly illustrates how the community strengthens both its internal cohesion and external adaptability through cultural adjustment. The developmental trajectory of the Baishou Dance clearly demonstrates this path of resilience-building. In 1958, the Baishou Dance troupe from Shemihuo Village, Laifeng County, Hubei Province, performed outside the mountains for the first time at the Hubei Provincial Art Festival, marking an initial leap from a rural community tradition to a broader stage. In 2011, the Laifeng Baishou Dance was performed in Sydney, signifying that this local cultural practice had acquired international communicative capacity. During cross-ethnic performances shared with other dances, the Baishou Dance, through its common characteristics such as the “same-side arm and leg movements,” highlighted the inclusive essence of Chinese culture—“harmony in diversity”—and became an embodied narrative of the nation’s “pluralistic unity.”

As a cultural vehicle of community resilience, the embodied discourse of the Baishou Dance has successfully transcended ethnic boundaries, achieving a dual function. Internally, it strengthens cultural identity and forges a shared consciousness of the Chinese national community, nurturing the enduring cultural roots of a “civilization whose sacred flame has never been extinguished.” Externally, through international exchanges, it showcases the charm of Chinese culture, demonstrating cultural confidence and strategic composure amid a “century of great changes,” and establishing a contemporary framework for mutual learning among civilizations.

The modern transformation of the Baishou Dance has completed the shift from “I” to “we” in identity construction, forming a continuous narrative between tradition and modernity and constructing a dual identification space that bridges the local and the national. This transformation vividly illustrates the powerful resilience of cultural traditions that continue to rejuvenate in the process of modernization.

Fourthly, the Baishou Dance has become a “bonding agent” for community participation in the integration of culture and tourism. In tourism development, an increasing number of regions have begun to emphasize the central role of local communities. For example, in scenic areas such as the Enshi Grand Canyon and Tenglong Cave in Hubei Province, local villagers are invited to perform authentic, traditional Baishou Dance routines, allowing visitors to experience real culture rather than mere commercial shows. This not only creates employment opportunities for villagers but, more importantly, enables them to perceive the market value and unique appeal of their own culture directly. Such experiences foster cultural pride and a conscious sense of protection and inheritance. Culture, in this sense, becomes a manageable social asset, and the community evolves from being a bystander in development to becoming both its beneficiary and leading actor.

5. Conclusion

The protection and transmission of the Baishou Dance among the Tujia people on the southern slopes of the Wuling Mountains in China provides a vivid case for examining the interactive development of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and community dynamics. This case profoundly demonstrates that ICH is not a static exhibit confined to museums but a dynamically evolving and renewable social resource. It carries historical memory while simultaneously responding to the pulse of contemporary society. Faced with rapid social change, profound economic transformation, or sudden public crises such as pandemics, culturally rooted traditions within the community display extraordinary adaptive capacities. They provide powerful spiritual comfort, alleviating individual anxieties; enable effective social mobilization, reconnecting dispersed individuals; and stimulate spontaneous organizational capacity, helping the community maintain order and hope in times of crisis.

Each collective movement of the Baishou Dance constitutes a profound social process. It acts as a catalyst for community identity, where synchronized steps and resounding drumbeats repeatedly awaken and reinforce a sense of belonging. It also serves as a site for the accumulation of social capital, where villagers build trust and establish norms of reciprocity through joint rehearsals and performances, weaving a denser network of social support and cultural significance. Moreover, it functions as a ritual for rebuilding cultural confidence; through embodied practice, participants directly experience the charm of their culture, fostering pride in their ethnic heritage and a conscious commitment to its transmission. Therefore, what the Baishou Dance mobilizes is far more than bodily coordination and rhythm—it embodies internal harmony and collective sentiment within the community. What it safeguards is more than ancient rituals and patterns—it preserves a community's cultural resilience and vitality, enabling its members to face the future and respond effectively to challenges.

Therefore, the safeguarding of living intangible cultural heritage must move beyond a static “specimen-style preservation” mindset and shift toward a dynamic approach centered on empowering communities and activating traditions. Future policy-making and practical initiatives should place greater emphasis on supporting and respecting the community's central role in heritage transmission, ensuring their voice and decision-making authority. At the same time, creative transformation and innovative development based on the traditional core should be actively encouraged, allowing the Baishou Dance to live not only in memory but also in the present. For example, it can be integrated into tourism development to promote community-based economic growth, incorporated into educational systems to nurture younger generations, or disseminated through modern media platforms to enhance cultural influence. The ultimate goal is to enable the Baishou Dance to continue playing its irreplaceable core role in maintaining community bonds, fostering endogenous economic development, and enhancing regional cultural soft power.

Only when cultural heritage is fully liberated from the passive status of being “protected” and genuinely integrated into the flow of modern life—becoming voluntarily and actively transmitted by community members, serving as a proud spiritual marker, and providing real developmental opportunities and psychological nourishment—can such “intangible treasures” transcend time and remain ever-renewing. The communities nurtured by this heritage, in turn, can rely on the resilience embedded in their cultural DNA to withstand and thrive amid the forces of historical change, standing firm and enduring through generations. The lesson of the Baishou Dance is clear: the ultimate purpose of safeguarding cultural heritage is to preserve a source of strength for people facing the future.

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