

Research on the Inheritance of Shemihu Hands-swaying Dance Culture under the Perspective of Consolidating the Consciousness of the Chinese National Community

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Abstract: In Tujia-inhabited areas, there is a well-known saying: “Hands-swaying dance in the South, Funeral Dance in the North.” The southern hands-swaying dance, prevalent in the You River Basin where the Tujia people are concentrated, embodies rich cultural genes — those of the Tujia ethnic group, the regional community, and the broader Chinese civilization. It represents a vivid expression of outstanding Tujia cultural traditions within the broader context of Chinese traditional culture. This paper explores the “southern hands-swaying dance” from the perspective of systematic cultural protection. It examines the cultural genes embedded in hands-swaying dance — at the ethnic, regional, and national levels — to interpret how this dance, as an element of China’s intangible cultural heritage, contributes to the diverse yet unified structure of the Chinese nation. While international dissemination marks the modern development of hands-swaying dance as a representative of excellent traditional Chinese culture, its full vitality lies in being deeply rooted in the lives of local people. To play its positive role in promoting social and economic development, hands-swaying dance must be integrated into the systemic development of local society, economy, and culture. Therefore, its inheritance and development should be based on comprehensive planning that encompasses local conditions and cultural systems.

Keywords: Tujia ethnic group, hands-swaying dance, systematic protection, cultural genes

1. Introduction

The history of the Chinese nation is, in essence, a history of communication, exchange, and integration among its various ethnic groups. In the new era, the concept of “consolidating the consciousness of the Chinese national community” has become the central theme and guiding principle for promoting ethnic affairs and advancing the high-quality development of ethnic regions. The development of the Shemihu hands-swaying dance from a local cultural practice in Hedong to a symbol recognized globally exemplifies how intangible cultural heritage, grounded in a people-centered cultural orientation, can enrich daily life. It also serves as a cultural symbol reflecting the charm of the Chinese national community on the world stage.

Hands-swaying dance is widely practiced in the You River and Yuan River regions, spanning the borderlands of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, and Guizhou, with particular prominence in the You River Basin. It is the most popular folk dance among the Tujia people, known in the Tujia language as “Sheba,” “Sheba-ri,” “Shebagechi,” or “Shebaba.” Rooted in specific folk customs and practices, this dance encapsulates cultural elements that are essential to understanding the origins and characteristics of China’s outstanding traditional culture within the broader narrative of ethnic history. To ensure the continuity and resonance of such traditions in the context of modernization, it is vital to identify and express them through recognizable, outward cultural forms. This process of internal coherence within modern cultural systems is the natural result of a systematic approach to protecting intangible cultural heritage.

2. Hierarchical Structure of the Cultural Genes of the Hands-swaying dance

From the perspective of the Chinese national community, the cultural genes embedded in the Tujia hands-swaying dance are undoubtedly an essential component of China’s outstanding traditional culture. The evolution of the Shemihu hands-swaying dance — from a sacrificial ritual dance to a nationally promoted fitness activity — reflects a cultural development trajectory spanning three layers: regional cultural genes, ethnic cultural genes, and the cultural genes of the Chinese nation.

This transformation traces a path from kinship-based communities to geographically defined communities, and ultimately to the broader Chinese national community; from clan and tribal sacrificial rituals to ethnic cultural symbols of the Tujia people, and eventually to nationally recognized fitness programs infused with elements of traditional Chinese culture. The hands-swaying dance vividly illustrates a people-centered development pathway for ethnic dance traditions. Within this logical and organic progression, hands-swaying dance encapsulates the Tujia people’s deep wisdom of survival. It manifests

philosophical insights into the relationship between humans and nature, interpersonal relationships, and the internal moral, behavioral, and value systems of individuals. These rich connotations all converge within the broader framework of Chinese cultural inclusiveness and the traditional value of harmony. Hands-swaying dance thus not only embodies a localized expression of traditional wisdom but also resonates with the universal values upheld by the Chinese nation.

2.1 Ethnic Cultural Genes in the Tujia hands-swaying dance

As the saying goes, “Each ethnic group bears its own distinctive cultural traits, and each region carries its own indigenous roots” [1]. The hands-swaying dance is undoubtedly one of the most prominent ethnic markers of the Tujia people and a profound embodiment of their local cultural rootedness.

As a ritual dance with sacrificial origins, the hands-swaying dance has a long-standing history in Laifeng County, Hubei Province. In *Annotations on the Book of the Southern Barbarians* (Tang Dynasty), Fan Chuo records in Volume 10: “The Ba people perform ancestral sacrifices with drumbeats.” The *Gazetteer of Yongshun Prefecture* from the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty states: “Each village has a hands-swaying dance Hall, also known as the Ghost Hall, said to be inhabited by deceased native officials. From the third to the seventeenth day of the first lunar month, gongs and drums are sounded at night, and men and women gather to sing and dance—this is called the hands-swaying dance. The custom remains to this day.” (Qianlong Edition, *Gazetteer of Yongshun Prefecture*) Similarly, the *Gazetteer of Laifeng County* (Tongzhi edition, Qing Dynasty), quoting the *Gazetteer of Huguang*, records: “In Manshui Village of Shizhou, there is a tree named ‘Pusheshu’. ‘Pusheshu’ translates to ‘graceful’ in Chinese. In the past, an ancestor of the Qin clan cut a unique tree near the Dongmen Pass, which drifted downstream to Nannian, took root again, and grew... Descendants of the Qin clan sang and danced beneath it, and the flowers would fall. When members of other surnames sang, the flowers would not fall...” The “Pusheshu” from Dongmen Pass symbolized the ancestors of the Qin clan and marked the transition of the tribe from a forest-dwelling, migratory people to a settled agrarian community in the river valley. Their later migration to Manshui in Laifeng and intermarriage with other surnames signifies a crucial transformation from kinship-based to geography-based community ties—a change that Friedrich Engels once identified as a hallmark of the shift from tribe to nation. The ritual of singing and dancing beneath the tree is not only a metaphor for the clan’s migration but also a collective memory of social transformation among the Tujia ancestors in the upper reaches of the You River.

The hands-swaying dance features a variety of narrative themes such as Entering the Ancestral Hall, Commemorating the Eight Divisions, Brother and Sister Marry, Migration and Settlement, Self-defense against Invaders, and Sending Off the Spirits. These themes vividly portray the lives, production activities, and wars of the ancestors, expressing profound reverence for them. This original cultural form has played a decisive role in shaping the collective psychological qualities of the Tujia people. Ancestor worship is a core expression of these shared psychological traits. Revered figures among the Tujia include historical heroes such as Duke Peng, Tian Haohan, and Lord Xiang—most of whom lived during the Five Dynasties to the Song Dynasty and were intimately linked to the ethnogenesis of the Tujia people. In honor of these ancestors, the Tujia people constructed numerous temples, such as the Tuwang Temple, Temple of the Eight Division Kings, and hands-swaying dance Hall.

2.2 Regional Community Cultural Genes in the Tujia hands-swaying dance

As discussed previously, themes such as Sibling Marriage and Migration and Settlement in the ancestral worship narratives of the hands-swaying dance point to deeper cultural archetypes. Among these, one can extract a core mythological motif prevalent among ethnic minorities in Southwest China—the “sibling marriage” origin myth. These myths, rooted in ancestral worship and tribal genesis, often revolve around a deluge narrative, in which siblings survive a great flood and subsequently marry to reestablish humanity. Such “sibling marriage-type flood myths” are widespread and constitute a shared cultural memory across multiple ethnic groups in the region. This narrative convergence reveals a profound sense of community consciousness embedded in the collective memory of the ethnic minorities in Southwest China. Furthermore, it uncovers what scholars have termed a “densely woven and orderly cultural network formed between folk essence and folk linkage” [2]. Deep within collective memory, this cultural network encodes the people’s ethical norms, cultural values, productive labor practices, and daily lives, thereby sustaining the very existence and development of communities within the regional folklore system [2].

Moreover, the hands-swaying dance has evolved beyond a mere marker of Tujia ethnic identity or local rootedness. It has expanded from its origins among the Tujia in Hedong District of Laifeng County to become a shared cultural activity among various ethnic groups across the entire Southwest region. The dance has also undergone functional transformation—from an exclusive sacrificial ritual to a widespread activity in national fitness programs. Today, members of all 18 ethnic groups in Laifeng County participate in hands-swaying dance. The hands-swaying has danced its way out of Hedong, out of

Laifeng, beyond Enshi, and even beyond China's national borders. It has not only strengthened the cohesion of regional communities in Southwest China but has also become a cultural symbol representing this regional identity to the broader world.

2.3 The Cultural Genes of Outstanding Traditional Chinese Culture in the Baishou Dance of the Tujia Ethnic Group

We can interpret the cultural genes of outstanding traditional Chinese culture embedded in Baishou Dance from two aspects: the imitation of tiger movements and the memories of life and production.

Firstly, from the imitation of tiger movements in Baishou Dance—such as the movement “The Fierce Tiger Descends the Mountain”—we can deduce the cultural genes of the Tujia people as brave and battle-wise, resistant to oppression, and deeply patriotic. It is well known that various ethnic groups with ancestral ties to Fuxi express reverence for the tiger totem, including the Qiang, Yi, and Bai ethnic groups. The tiger totem within the Tujia culture can be summarized by the spirit of courage and martial prowess. During the Ming Dynasty, when Japanese pirates invaded the southeastern coast, tens of thousands of soldiers from western Hunan and Hubei were dispatched and achieved the decisive victory at Wangjiangjing, recorded in history as “the greatest military success in the southeast” [3]. The resistance against British forces by Chen Liansheng and his sons, the anti-oppression struggles led by figures such as Ba Manzi, Xiang Xietang, Wen Chaozhong, and Huang Yushan, as well as the fearless contributions of individuals like Wang Jianhong (wife of Qu Qiubai), peasant movement leader Huang Xingwu from Shihe, Tujia youth Zhao Juntao from Longtan in Youyang, and Wan Tao, leader of the Xiang-E-West Special Committee—each reflects the bravery, indomitability, and patriotic fervor of the Tujia people, encapsulating the cultural essence of the Chinese nation.

Secondly, after the implementation of the “gaitu guiliu” policy (which replaced native chieftains with state-appointed officials), large numbers of immigrants moved to Laifeng. As a result, interactions and integration among the Tujia, Han, Miao, Dong, and other ethnic groups deepened. Baishou Dance was no longer solely a symbol of Tujia ethnic identity but evolved into a cultural emblem representing the shared regional community of various ethnic groups in southwest China.

On February 4, 2011, the Baishou Dance troupe from Laifeng County accompanied the Hubei provincial government to Sydney, Australia, to participate in the “Jingchu Culture Tours Australia for Chinese New Year” series of events. During the grand “2011 Chinese New Year Parade” in Sydney, a 45-member Laifeng Baishou Dance delegation performed a display that combined authentic Tujia elements such as Maogusi and Eight-Treasure Bronze Bells. Their bold, unrestrained, and magnificent performance captivated and delighted over 100,000 spectators, including local citizens and Chinese diaspora. In this way, Baishou Dance—originating from Hedong, Baifusi Town, Laifeng County—has journeyed onto the world stage as a representative of the outstanding traditional culture of the Chinese nation.

3. Inheritance and Systematic Protection of the Cultural Genes of Tujia Baishou Dance

The Baishou Dance, once the most popular folk dance in Tujia regions, has developed into a national intangible cultural heritage and even stepped onto the international stage. Behind this transformation lies the persistent efforts of generations of cultural inheritors, who have driven the evolution of Baishou Dance. Although the protection and inheritance of Baishou Dance have been extensively discussed within the field of practical folklore, few scholars have approached the issue from the perspective of cultural genes. Today's intangible cultural heritage protection policies provide an effective framework for safeguarding and passing on the Baishou Dance. Cultural inheritors are undoubtedly the core element in this process. Based on current practices in the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, the traditional strategy that radiates outward from the inheritor as the center must now respond to the needs of modern life in traditional villages under the strategy of rural revitalization. To study the systematic protection of Baishou Dance culture with the inheritor at its core, it is necessary to seek a holistic development approach through the coupling of traditional interpretations and modern performances of Baishou Dance.

3.1 Institutional Support Systems Drive the Innovative Development of Baishou Dance Culture

From a sacrificial dance and festive entertainment to a national intangible cultural heritage, and from specific performance venues to international stages, the promotion and development of Baishou Dance in Laifeng amidst the wave of modernization is inseparable from governmental institutional efforts. Since the 1980s, Baishou Dance has gradually transformed from a ritual and festive activity into a popular fitness program in the border regions of Hunan, Hubei, and Chongqing. In Laifeng's rural revitalization efforts, Baishou Dance has also become closely integrated with tourism development. With support from formal systems, the development of Shemihu Baishou Dance has broken traditional gender taboos and empha-

sized a people-oriented lifestyle through the national fitness movement. Drummers, the core performers in Baishou Dance, were traditionally male-only due to inherited customs. However, training classes for drummers in Shemihu have broken this gender taboo—among over 100 trainees, more than 40 were women. (According to local government staff in Baifusi Town and oral accounts from elder Peng Nanqing of Shemihu Village.) This undoubtedly broadened the pool of inheritors and benefited the modernization of Baishou Dance.

3.2 The Inheritance of Baishou Dance Must Stay Rooted in the People: “Dancing Among the Masses” and “Swinging in Unison”

In the systemic development of local society, economy, and culture, Baishou Dance must return to the people and fully exert its positive impact on economic and social development as an outstanding traditional culture. At the 2023 Dragon Boat Festival Border Region Regatta organized by Baifusi Town in Laifeng County, the opening ceremony featured a Baishou Dance performance from Shemihu Village—the “birthplace of Baishou Dance” in China. Dancers were divided into two groups: one performed along the street, and the other welcomed guests from Hubei, Hunan, Sichuan, and Chongqing. All the performers were villagers of Shemihu. After dinner, it has become a daily routine for villagers to dance Baishou in the courtyard of the village committee. Peng Chengjin, a fifth-generation national representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage, is committed to exploring new movements in Baishou Dance. From the sacred altars to the global stage and back into daily life, Baishou Dance has become a medium for enhancing social cohesion and revitalizing grassroots governance in Shemihu. In this way, Baishou Dance culture has become an invisible but powerful driver of the “culture-rooted soul-building” model under the “Two Mountains Theory” (lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets) in Shemihu.

3.3 The Inheritance and Development of Baishou Dance Culture Require a Systematic Development Perspective

As previously mentioned, the government has played a crucial role in the inheritance and development of Baishou Dance. As a national intangible cultural heritage, Baishou Dance must now enter a new phase of systematic protection. That is, we must position the development of economy, culture, and society within an integrated perspective and define their interrelations accordingly. On this basis, systematic protection of Baishou Dance should focus on its deep involvement in the logic of grassroots social order and governance. Festival activities can stimulate economic growth to a certain degree and temporarily inspire internal cohesion among diverse stakeholders. However, establishing a sustainable mechanism to maintain this momentum is a major challenge for local development. Rather than relying solely on external resources, it is more effective to tap into the vast potential of culture. Thus, constructing a Baishou Dance-centered cultural system—encompassing architectural culture, culinary culture, clothing culture, and other aspects of traditional excellence—offers a promising path for preserving the vitality of traditional villages.

4. Conclusion

The development of folk culture faces the challenges of modernity, and the cultural gene inheritance of the Tujia Baishou Dance is no exception. In this social reality, the discussion of the cultural gene inheritance of the Tujia Baishou Dance in Shemihu Village is, in fact, a discussion on the future direction of Tujia culture. This paper explores the basic dance lyrics of the Tujia Baishou Dance in Shemihu Village, analyzes the ethnic cultural genes, the regional community cultural genes, and the development trajectory of the excellent traditional Chinese cultural genes embedded in the dance, and further explores the systematic development path of Baishou Dance in the local society, economy, and culture in the context of modernization. This development approach, through the “Two Mountains Practice,” promotes the development of the local society and economy with the model of “culture-rooted soul-building.” This not only holds practical significance for the development of various ethnic communities in southwestern China, but also contributes Eastern wisdom to the presentation of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation.

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