

Cultural Co-Inheritance and Value Isomorphism: Multi-Role Interaction in the Tunpu Xiufu Ritual and the Local Construction of the Shared Spiritual Home of the Chinese Nation

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Abstract: Xiufu (merit cultivation) is a women-centered folk belief tradition within Tunpu culture in central Guizhou. Based on fieldwork in Liuguan Township, Anshun, this study examines how Futou (female ritual leaders), Taoist priests, village elders' organizations, Dixi (local opera) troupes, spirit mediums, and ordinary believers interact across ritual practice, village governance, and cultural transmission, and how these interactions support cultural co-inheritance and value isomorphism. The findings show that Xiufu is not an isolated local "little tradition." Its historical formation reflects the coexistence of Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, and shamanic elements, long-term interethnic exchange, and cross-regional religious networks. Its living transmission depends on differentiated ritual labor, dual-track collaboration in village affairs, and collective cultural work. The moral exhortation, sentiment of family and country, and collective affect conveyed through Fuge (blessing songs) and ritual practice connect local folk values with the common values of the Chinese nation, giving the shared spiritual home a concrete local form in central Guizhou. The case provides a micro-level perspective on how folk culture can contribute to forging a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation in multiethnic regions.

Keywords: Xiufu; Folk Belief; Multi-Role Interaction; Shared Spiritual Home of the Chinese Nation

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1. Introduction

Folk belief is one of the settings in which cultural memory, local order, and value transmission intersect in everyday life. In the multiethnic regions of Southwest China, such practices preserve local histories and identities while also entering into wider value frameworks. Wu Xiaohua et al. describe the shared spiritual home as a space of shared cognition, emotional connection, and value orientation among China's ethnic groups, and thus as an internal value basis for building a community for the Chinese nation^[1]. In this study, that concept provides a way to examine how a local ritual tradition becomes connected to broader cultural and collective meanings through ordinary practice.

Existing research on folk belief has often emphasized ritual features or the position of women as ritual subjects, leaving less empirical attention to interaction among multiple actors and to the ways such interaction may embody a pattern of "pluralistic unity" or connect local values with the common values of the Chinese nation. Tunpu culture offers a particularly revealing

case. It emerged from the accommodation of Jiangnan military migrants to the environment of central Guizhou under the early Ming military-agricultural settlement (juntun) system and has retained relatively stable cultural forms for roughly six centuries. Xiufu (also known as Xiufu) is a women-centered belief tradition within this cultural setting. Organized by Futou and practiced through paohuikou, or movement among ritual assemblies, it has a relatively complete ritual system. Previous Tunpu studies have largely addressed women's status, ritual processes, and the documentation of huikou materials; the multi-role network through which Xiufu is sustained, and its significance for community building, have received less systematic attention.

Field observation complicates any view of Xiufu as an activity confined to female believers. Ritual practice is embedded in a broader local social structure that also involves Taoist priests, village elders' organizations, Dixi troupes, spirit mediums, and local government actors. Their roles are differentiated, but their cooperation helps maintain both ritual continuity and aspects of village order. This embeddedness is especially important because Xiufu developed within a military-migrant society that combined Jiangnan traditions with the multiethnic cultural environment of central Guizhou. Its ethical ideas, sentiment of family and country, and forms of collective identification therefore provide an empirical entry point for examining the local construction of the shared spiritual home.

The study is centered on Zhouguan Village, Liuguan Township, Xixiu District, Anshun City, drawing on fieldwork and in-depth interviews conducted in July-August 2023. It first reconstructs the cultural context and transmission base of Xiufu, then examines how multiple actors interact in religious practice, village governance, and cultural transmission. On that basis, it analyzes the mechanism of "cultural co-inheritance," the relationship between Xiufu's folk values and the common values of the Chinese nation, and the pressures facing contemporary transmission. The aim is to provide a micro-level account of how a local folk tradition is maintained, interpreted, and adapted within a multiethnic setting.

2. Cultural Context and Transmission Base of Tunpu Xiufu

The continuity of Xiufu cannot be understood apart from the historical environment in which it emerged or from the people who carry it forward. In the case examined here, the mountainous ecology of central Guizhou, the social legacy of military migration, a plural religious environment, and a women-centered transmission structure together form the conditions within which the tradition has developed.

2.1 A Context of Plural Coexistence

Anshun lies in the core karst belt of central Guizhou, where mountains and intermontane basins shape both settlement patterns and mountain agriculture. During the Hongwu reign of the Ming dynasty, the imperial court established garrison stations (weisuo) and stationed military settlers across the Anshun area as part of its effort to consolidate the southwestern frontier. Several hundred thousand soldiers from Jiangnan and the Central Plains, together with their families, subsequently registered as permanent residents of central Guizhou, forming a military-migrant society^[2]. Over the following six centuries, Tunpu communities retained a Jiangnan cultural grounding while living in sustained proximity to Miao, Buyi, and other ethnic groups. This combination of long-term contact and relatively distinct cultural boundaries provided an important social setting for the development of Xiufu.

Within this settlement history, Tunpu religious life has been marked by practical pluralism. Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, and shamanic elements coexist with nature worship, ancestor worship, and polytheistic practice; Guanyin and the Jade Emperor, Lord Guan and Lord Wang, ancestors, local deities, and the Earth God all occupy places within the religious world of local residents. Previous research likewise notes that Tunpu belief is plural and pragmatic rather than exclusively attached to a single religious tradition^[3]. Xiufu developed within this open religious ecology and could therefore incorporate elements from different traditions without requiring a single doctrinal affiliation.

Xiufu's provenance also reflects localization across regions. Women's incense associations (xianghui) brought from Jiangnan were adapted after entering Guizhou and gradually incorporated local and minority ethnic elements. Paohuikou, Guanyin worship, vegetarian practice, and Buddha-recitation retain links with Jiangnan incense associations, whereas the Fuliuma shamanic-healing ritual and the worship of mountain and tree deities draw on practices found among neighboring ethnic groups in central Guizhou. Wan Ming's discussion of the introduction of Lord Wang worship into Guizhou emphasizes that

early Ming military migration involved both cultural transplantation and identity construction, with folk belief contributing to social integration^[4]. Xiufu's formation can be understood within this same process of cross-regional cultural adaptation.

2.2 A Female-Centered Transmission Structure

Women occupy the central position in the transmission of Xiufu. Futou organize and transmit ritual knowledge, while ordinary Xiufu women constitute the broadest body of participants. Within the patrilineal clan framework of Tunpu society, the tradition also creates a distinct spiritual and social sphere in which women can organize collective practice and build relationships beyond the household.

Futou are the principal organizers and ritual transmitters. They are selected either through recognized competence or through family inheritance, and their internal hierarchy is tied to experience and ritual knowledge. Senior Futou (lao futou) master core Fuge and ritual procedures, preside over major ceremonies, and train newcomers; newer Futou (xin futou) take responsibility for practical arrangements and learn through participation. The group maintains established financial arrangements, divisions of ritual labor, and methods of coordination, enabling it to organize Xiufu activities independently and to provide continuing ritual services within the village.

Ordinary Xiufu women sustain the tradition through participation. It has long been customary for Tunpu women to take up Xiufu after completing their childbearing years, although levels of devotion and modes of participation vary across generations. Their motivations cluster around religious cultivation, family blessing, and social interaction. Paohuikou allows women to move beyond household and village boundaries; participation in Futou-led activities can bring involvement in public affairs and local recognition; and collective ritual creates sororal ties that extend beyond kinship. At the same time, the values emphasized in Xiufu - accumulating virtue, doing good, and showing filial care for elders and kin - return to household life and reinforce the ethical order of the village.

3. Multi-Role Interaction in Xiufu Ritual Practice

Xiufu is sustained less by a single religious authority than by a network of differentiated but interdependent actors. The pattern of cooperation changes with the social setting. Ritual practice relies on complementary religious roles; village governance links female ritual actors with male elders' organizations and local authorities; and cultural transmission depends on cooperation among Futou, literate villagers, and Dixi troupes. These relationships show how the continuity of the ritual is produced through everyday coordination rather than through a single organizational center.

3.1 Religious Practice: Differentiated and Complementary Roles

Religious work is distributed among Taoist priests, Futou, and female spirit mediums. Each responds to a different range of needs, and the boundaries among them are maintained through practical coordination rather than strict institutional separation. The Taoist priest is a male professional religious specialist who occupies the formal center of ritual authority. He masters classical liturgy, presides over naming ceremonies, geomancy (fengshui) consultations, funerals, and the large-scale Guohe ("crossing the river") ritual, and serves as a recognized intermediary between humans and the divine. In village usage, he is respectfully addressed as xiansheng ("Master").

Futou, by contrast, provide locally embedded and more routine ritual services. Because formal priestly services are relatively costly and cannot cover everyday needs, Futou draw on their familiarity with village households and usually provide flexible services on a largely voluntary basis. At funerals, the Taoist priest handles core procedures such as opening the way (kailu) and conducting the Daoist rite (zuo daochang), while Futou undertake more intimate tasks, including bathing and dressing the deceased, chanting Shangluofo for the departed's journey, and performing Tianliang ("adding grain") to extend longevity^[5]. The same complementarity appears in other contexts: priests may identify the ritual nature of a problem while Futou carry out the corresponding practice, and in large ceremonies priests oversee the overall sequence while Futou mobilize participants and manage details. This arrangement combines formal ritual authority with accessible everyday service.

Female spirit mediums occupy another part of this service network, addressing personalized and private spiritual concerns that may fall outside the routine scope of priests or Futou, such as soul loss and ritual healing (rangbing). The three roles therefore complement rather than simply compete with one another. Futou consult Taoist priests when they encounter difficult cases, while disputes among ritual actors can be mediated by village elders. The stability of the system rests on this practical

capacity to redistribute problems across roles.

3.2 Village Governance: Dual-Track Collaboration

Xiufu also extends into village public life. Religious actors interact with self-governing organizations through a gendered division of labor, while both remain in contact with local government. The result is not a formal merger of institutions but a pattern of overlapping participation in public affairs and the provision of local public goods.

The clearest example is the relationship between the Futou group and the male elders' association. The elders' association, composed of retired cadres, teachers, and respected senior men, tends to handle infrastructure construction, dispute mediation, and other relatively formal village affairs. Futou are more often involved in maintaining ritual propriety, mediating family tensions, and organizing public blessings. Their responsibilities nevertheless overlap. The elders' association may lead repairs to bridges and roads, with Futou performing *caijiao* ("treading the bridge") and offering blessings at completion; Futou may mediate family disputes that are difficult for the elders' association to enter directly; and they organize rain-praying or household blessing activities when village circumstances call for them. In Zhouguan Village, both groups use Huilong Temple and consult one another on shared matters, making this gendered dual-track arrangement visible in everyday governance.

Interaction with local government follows a different logic. Government actors set safety requirements for large-scale events while generally allowing everyday belief practices to continue, and Xiufu participants adjust their activities to these administrative constraints. Fuge have also incorporated contemporary themes, and gatherings were voluntarily suspended during the epidemic. These examples show how local governance requirements and folk practice are negotiated in concrete situations rather than remaining separate spheres.

Public works further connect belief with collective action. Repairing bridges and roads or erecting way-finding steles can be understood within Xiufu as acts that accumulate merit. Futou may initiate the activity, the elders' association coordinates implementation, villagers contribute money or labor, and Dixi troupes may perform after completion. What begins as a religiously meaningful act is therefore translated into a chain of public participation that also contributes to village solidarity.

3.3 Cultural Transmission: Collective Collaboration

Cultural transmission depends on another set of relationships. Futou preserve ritual knowledge largely through oral transmission, while literate villagers and Dixi performers provide written, performative, and mnemonic resources. The result is a division of cultural labor in which no single group controls the entire process.

The relationship between literate men and Futou is especially important because many Futou do not rely on writing to transmit Fuge. Retired teachers and Taoist priests in the village help copy, collate, and standardize song texts and sometimes compose new material; Futou then return these texts to an oral mode of transmission through teaching and ritual performance. Written mediation thus supports, rather than replaces, the living oral transmission of ritual knowledge.

Dixi troupes are connected to Xiufu through repeated ritual and performative exchange. When a Dixi trunk is opened (*kaixiang*), Futou may perform *Guma guahong* ("aunts draping red silk"). Fuge can also draw on the stories of historical heroes performed in Dixi and recast them as material for moral exhortation. During larger events, ritual and performance may proceed in parallel and reinforce one another's significance.

Through repeated participation, stories of migrant origins, heroic narratives of loyalty, filial piety, fidelity, and righteousness, traditions of cross-regional pilgrimage, and practices of mutual assistance are continually reactivated. Their persistence does not depend only on textual preservation; it is reproduced through shared participation and becomes part of the cultural bonds through which Tunpu collective identity is maintained.

4. Cultural Co-Inheritance as an Underlying Mechanism

The interactions described above are linked by what this study terms cultural co-inheritance. In Xiufu, co-inheritance is not a single process or a closed set of parallel components. It emerges where religious syncretism, interethnic exchange, and cross-regional circulation overlap. Together, these processes explain how a local ritual tradition can remain recognizably Tunpu while continually incorporating materials, actors, and meanings from beyond a single village or religious lineage.

4.1 Religious Integration: Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist, and Shamanic Coexistence

Xiufu combines Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and shamanic elements without requiring believers to resolve them into a single

doctrinal system. This coexistence gives practical form to the idea of “harmony in diversity” (he er butong): difference is retained, but the elements are made compatible within ritual life.

Buddhist elements provide much of Xiufu’s ritual background. Guanyin is the principal object of worship, the three Guanyin assemblies are central huikou in the annual cycle, and Guohe draws on the story of Mulian rescuing his mother. Reincarnation, karmic retribution, vegetarian practice, and Buddha-recitation also shape the belief framework. Yet the Buddhism encountered in Xiufu is highly embedded in everyday concerns: participants primarily seek family safety and the smooth conduct of daily life rather than doctrinal study.

Taoist influence is more visible in ritual technique and the pantheon. Yinyang geomancy, liturgical procedures, talismans, and deities such as the Jade Emperor, the Earth God, and the City God are drawn largely from Taoist practice, while the involvement of Taoist priests in major ceremonies provides an institutional link to this tradition. Xiufu adopts these elements pragmatically, according to ritual need.

Confucian ethics operate at the level of moral interpretation. Fuge repeatedly invoke loyalty, filial piety, fidelity and righteousness, the accumulation of virtue, good deeds, and mutual assistance among neighbors. Praying for family members, extending the longevity of elders, and participating in village public welfare are understood as moral acts as well as ritual ones. Fang Lili and Li Yue argue that Chinese culture has taken Confucian ethics as a central value foundation while absorbing Buddhist and Taoist resources through long-term interaction^[6]. In Xiufu, this relationship appears in a vernacular form: Confucian moral language supplies an ethical orientation, while Buddhist and Taoist elements provide important ritual resources.

Indigenous shamanic elements, including Fuliuma and rain-praying, add another layer and give Xiufu a distinct local form. Ordinary participants do not necessarily police the doctrinal boundaries among these traditions. Their pragmatic use of different religious resources is itself part of the plural structure through which Xiufu has been transmitted.

4.2 Interethnic Mutual Learning: Exchange and Borrowing

Xiufu is therefore not simply a one-way continuation of Han migrant culture. Long-term coexistence with neighboring Miao, Buyi, and other ethnic communities has introduced additional ritual elements and created settings in which belief practices are shared across ethnic boundaries.

Liuguan Township is a multiethnic settlement area in which Tunpu and minority villages are intermingled and have remained in contact for centuries. The Fuliuma soul-recovery ritual and the worship of mountain and tree deities in Xiufu are linked in the field materials to surrounding minority traditions. Cross-village huikou networks also create shared religious spaces in which participants from different ethnic groups join mountain pilgrimages and pray for blessings together. Existing research has shown that shared religious practice can foster cross-ethnic emotional integration and a consciousness of shared destiny^[7]. The Xiufu case illustrates a comparable process at the local level: cultural elements circulate through contact, and interethnic identification develops through repeated participation. The field material presents this borrowing as reciprocal rather than one-directional, with different traditions enriched through continuing exchange.

4.3 Cross-Regional Connection through Paohuikou

Paohuikou gives cultural co-inheritance a spatial infrastructure. Xiufu huikou are distributed across several counties and districts, and assembly seasons bring participants from different townships to common pilgrimage sites. There they exchange Fuge, coordinate schedules, and establish continuing relationships. Ritual knowledge therefore moves through a tiered network rather than remaining confined to individual villages. As songs, practices, and organizational routines circulate, local forms of Xiufu become more mutually intelligible; an identity as “Xiufu people” (xiufu ren) can extend beyond village boundaries, and village communities become connected through a wider regional cultural network. This circulation helps explain how Tunpu cultural cohesion has been maintained through long-term social change.

5. Value Isomorphism and the Local Construction of the Shared Spiritual Home

The argument of value isomorphism concerns the way Xiufu’s local moral world connects with values articulated at the level of the Chinese nation. The long continuity of the tradition is rooted not only in ritual organization but also in the fact that its moral exhortations, family-state orientation, and collective emotions can be interpreted within a wider value framework. In

this sense, the shared spiritual home is constructed locally through repeated practices rather than existing only as an abstract cultural proposition.

5.1 Ethical Isomorphism and Traditional Virtues

Moral exhortation is central to Xiufu. Fuge repeatedly connect religious cultivation with everyday conduct, so that accumulating merit is evaluated through actions toward parents, neighbors, and the wider community rather than through ritual performance alone.

The saying “good deeds are rewarded with good, and evil deeds with evil” expresses the close relationship between moral conduct and the expectation of blessing. Xiufu also stresses that “to be filial to one’s parents at home is worth more than burning ten sticks of incense,” while repairing bridges and roads or assisting people in difficulty are treated as substantive forms of cultivation. The idea that “accumulated goodness brings surplus blessings” (ji shan yu qing) therefore links religious practice to a broader moral economy in which virtue precedes material gain.

Family ethics are equally prominent. Participants pray for the safety of family members, perform Tianliang to extend the longevity of elders, and seek favorable outcomes for children. Funeral practices of reverence for the deceased and remembrance of ancestors (shenzhong zhuiyuan), together with wedding blessings, reinforce filial care and household harmony. Within village evaluation, women who participate in Xiufu are also commonly associated with virtuous conduct and competent household management.

The same moral logic extends into public life. When participation in public works is framed as an opportunity to accumulate merit, mutual assistance becomes both a religiously meaningful action and a village ethic. The ideal of shouwang xiangzhu - watching over one another and offering mutual aid - thus connects private virtue with a public orientation at the grassroots level.

5.2 Family-State Isomorphism: From Household Blessings to the Sentiment of Family and Country

Xiufu’s value orientation extends outward from the individual and household toward the village and the state. This movement corresponds to the idea of family-state homology (jiaguo tonggou), in which personal cultivation, family responsibility, public obligation, and concern for political order are understood as connected rather than separate domains.

The sequence is visible in both ritual responsibility and the content of Fuge. Ordinary participants commonly begin with prayers for their own families. Futou, however, assume responsibilities that include village blessings and participation in public affairs, while songs transmitted by senior Futou include wishes for national peace and prosperity (guotai min’an). The movement from self-cultivation to family well-being, village peace, and national order echoes the Confucian sequence of “cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to all under Heaven.” Xiufu gives this family-state sentiment a vernacular ritual form.

Fuge also show that the tradition is capable of incorporating contemporary meanings. Older expressions such as “attaining noble rank” (zhong zhuhou) have been replaced or supplemented by references to “entering college” and “becoming successors”; during the epidemic, new lyrics wished for the epidemic to recede; and in the context of rural revitalization, verses about increasingly prosperous lives were added. These changes are largely produced by participants themselves. Dixi and Fuge also circulate stories of figures such as Guan Yu and Yue Fei, bringing the ideal of serving the country with utmost loyalty (jingzhong baoguo) into everyday performance. Research on folk tradition has emphasized its role in carrying historical memory and representing the long process through which different ethnic groups jointly created Chinese civilization^[8]. In Xiufu, such memory is reproduced through local ritual and song rather than through formal instruction alone.

5.3 Emotional Isomorphism and Shared Affective Bonds

Collective ritual also produces emotional bonds that support the shared spiritual home. The effect is not created by doctrine alone: it emerges through embodied participation, mutual assistance, and the repetition of shared practices across generations. Participants support one another on pilgrimage routes, chant sutras together, accompany and comfort families at funerals, and gather after ritual events. These experiences create bonds among fellow practitioners and a sense of collective capacity beyond the individual household. Local belonging is reinforced through intergenerational transmission as grandmothers, mothers, and daughters pass on Fuge and principles of conduct through oral teaching. Such attachment to home culture

provides a micro-level basis on which wider forms of identification can be built. Wang Dan argues that shared cultural memories and emotional connections provide an ideological and cultural foundation for the formation of a community for the Chinese nation^[9]. The emotional community sustained through Xiufu can therefore be understood as one local component of the shared spiritual home.

6. Contemporary Transformation and Revitalization

Modernization and urbanization are changing the social conditions under which Xiufu is transmitted. The central issue is not simply whether the tradition survives, but whether its ritual knowledge, carriers, and social functions can remain connected as participation patterns change. For Xiufu to continue contributing to the shared spiritual home and to the forging of a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, revitalization must work with these changes rather than treat the tradition as static.

6.1 Challenges to Contemporary Transmission

Ritual discontinuity is the most visible pressure. Large ceremonies such as Guohe have been constrained by safety and cost and have not been held for nearly 40 years; practices such as fasting have become less strict, while modern elements have entered the ritual repertoire. These changes do not simply reduce ritual complexity: they alter the conditions under which knowledge is learned and transmitted. Intergenerational succession intensifies the problem. Urbanization has drawn many younger residents away for work or study, leaving villages with larger proportions of older people and children. Active Xiufu participants are mostly women over fifty, and the average age of Futou exceeds sixty, creating a clear risk of transmission gaps. At the same time, Xiufu's functions are shifting. Its explicitly religious role is weakening relative to its social, cultural, and elderly-care functions, so the inherited mode of transmission is being asked to serve needs that were previously less prominent.

6.2 Pathways for Revitalizing Xiufu Culture

These pressures favor living transmission over either outright prohibition as "feudal superstition" or rigid preservation that freezes the tradition in a single historical form. Where large rituals have become difficult to sustain, contemporary forms can be explored under clear safety conditions, while adaptive changes should remain compatible with the continuity of core practices. Priority should be given to the people and materials through which knowledge actually moves - especially Futou, Fuge, and core ritual procedures - so that protection retains the tradition's capacity for renewal rather than preserving only its external form.

The changing social function of Xiufu also makes value guidance important. Moral themes already present in the tradition - accumulating virtue and doing good, filial care for elders and kin, and mutual assistance among neighbors - can be articulated in ways that connect with the core socialist values and with moral governance at the grassroots level. This approach builds on meanings that participants already recognize instead of imposing a separate interpretive system on the ritual. It also provides a basis for Xiufu to participate in the cultural and ethical life of contemporary villages.

Public-cultural transformation provides another route where ritual participation alone is no longer sufficient to sustain transmission. Fuge can be collated and preserved as a form of folk literary heritage; Xiufu culture can enter local performances and experiential activities associated with Tunpu tourism; and the tradition's emphasis on mutual aid can be translated into resources for community building and elderly care. These uses extend Xiufu into the public cultural sphere while retaining a connection to the social relationships from which the tradition derives its meaning.

7. Conclusion

This study has examined Xiufu through the interactions among the actors who sustain it rather than treating the ritual as a self-contained belief practice. Fieldwork centered on Zhouguan Village shows that a women-centered tradition is maintained through differentiated cooperation with Taoist priests, spirit mediums, village elders, Dixi troupes, literate villagers, and local government actors. The same network links ritual practice to village governance and cultural transmission. At a broader level, Xiufu's continuity is supported by a process of cultural co-inheritance in which religious integration, interethnic exchange, and cross-regional circulation overlap, while the values conveyed in Fuge and collective ritual extend from moral conduct and

family responsibility to public ethics, the sentiment of family and country, and shared emotional identification. These findings help explain how the shared spiritual home acquires a concrete local form in Tunpu villages rather than remaining an abstract value proposition. They also indicate that contemporary revitalization depends on preserving the living carriers and core knowledge of Xiufu while allowing adaptive change in ritual form and public function. Because the analysis is an ethnographic case centered on Zhouguan Village, it is best read as a micro-level account rather than a general model for all Tunpu communities. Its contribution lies in showing how a local folk tradition can connect cultural continuity, everyday cooperation, and wider collective values within a specific multiethnic setting.

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