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The Intangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization and Rural Revitalization Practice of Market Folk Art – A Field Study Based on the Huji Book Fair

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Abstract: The Huji Book Fair, as a typical representative of the combination of rural markets and folk art performances in North China, originated in the Ming Dynasty, flourished during the Qing Dynasty, and was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. Based on local chronicles, interviews with artists, and field studies, this paper delves into the creation environment and organizational structure of the Huji Book Fair, exploring its cultural implications in terms of folk beliefs, moral education, and community cohesion. The study finds that, in the process of contemporary social development, the Huji Book Fair faces challenges such as generational discontinuity and the disappearance of rituals, with a sharp decline in full-time storytellers and fundamental changes in traditional forms and content. To address these issues, local efforts have included initiatives like "Book Fair into Schools" for cultural reproduction and the integration of culture and tourism to promote industrial exploration. The study suggests that the inheritance of the Huji Book Fair needs to seek a dynamic balance between tradition and innovation, government and grassroots, and tradition and technology, fully leveraging its cultural empowerment role in rural revitalization, achieving its living heritage and the reconstruction of rural cultural ecology in contemporary society.

Keywords: Huji Book Fair; Market Folk Art; Historical Inheritance; Intangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization

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The Huji Book Fair is a typical representative of the combination of rural markets and folk art performances in North China. Its origins can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty, and it flourished during the Qing Dynasty. As noted by G. William Skinner (1998), rural markets in North China are not only places for the exchange of goods but also serve as a social and cultural space for "grassroots market communities"[1]. The Huji Book Fair is built around the large Spring Festival market held on the twelfth day of the first lunar month, and follows a unique pattern of "showing books—writing books—performing in villages." It was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. This paper, based on the local chronicles of Huimin County, interviews with artists, and field studies, explores the organizational structure, artistic characteristics, and cultural value of the Huji Book Fair, providing a case reference for the living inheritance of traditional folk art.

1.Creation Environment: The Symbiotic Mechanism of Folk Art in Rural Society

Huji Town has a long history and is an important commercial hub, stretching south across the Yellow River and north to southern Hebei. It also has a rich tradition of storytelling culture, with folk art fairs forming based on market trade, reaching a

certain scale.

1.1 Geographical and Commercial Foundation

According to the Revised Huimin County Chronicle from the Republic of China, Huji is "the financial center of several counties in the southeast," with its livestock market and timber market being "the largest in the county." [2]The Spring Festival market on the 12th day of the first lunar month attracts people from dozens of surrounding counties, providing a strong flow of visitors for the book fair.

Huji Town, the location of the Huji Book Fair, is situated in the southeastern part of Huimin County, Binzhou City, Shandong Province. "The government office of Huji Town is also called Huji, or Huji Village[3].Huji Town is located on the northern alluvial plain of Shandong, with the Yellow River to the south, and has long been a commercial hub."

The Continuously Revised Huimin County Annals from the Republic of China era records that Huji "holds the financial center of several counties in the southeast," and its livestock market and timber market are "the largest in the county." The large Spring Festival market on the twelfth day of the first lunar month attracts people from surrounding counties, providing a foundation for the flow of people to the book fair.

1.2 Accumulation of Folk Art Tradition

The northern Shandong region has a well-known saying: "If you marry into Huji, it's not for the house or land, but for the chance to watch the plays in Huji." Since the Qing Dynasty, genres such as Xihe Drum and Wooden Board Drum have been popular, and by the Republic of China period, there were already over a hundred artists gathering at the Huimin Chenghuang Temple Fair. [4]The Huji Book Fair has continued this tradition, forming an interactive model of "performers setting up stalls to showcase books—villages hiring performers for shows."

In this region, a popular storytelling form called pingci does not require the use of drums or string instruments. It is a type of narrative storytelling based on novels, with content drawn from works such as Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms, Journey to the West, Tales of Mounted Bandits, The Decline of the Tang Dynasty, The Seven Heroes and Five Gallants, The Tale of Yue Fei, The Case of Judge Peng, The Case of Judge Shi, and The Case of Judge Bao. In addition to this, there are also forms such as guqiang (drum tunes), meihua diao (plum blossom tune), siyewa (four-tile clappers), and luoziqiang (falling-note tune). Their storytelling content typically involves plots like a young man traveling to the capital to seek relatives, an official going on an undercover inspection, or dramatic tales such as The Eight Immortals Cause a Stir in the East and Li Cuilian Hangs Herself.[5]

Among these, pingci refers to what is now known as pingshu (traditional oral storytelling), meihua diao is the predecessor of Xihe Drum, and siyewa is essentially bamboo clapper storytelling. These traditional forms remain the main performance genres at the Huji Book Fair today. Likewise, stories once told by past artists—The Case of Judge Peng, The Case of Judge Shi, The Case of Judge Bao, and Tales of Mounted Bandits—continue to be core repertoire for folk performers in rural areas.

The people of Huimin have always enjoyed listening to stories and watching plays, especially during the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, which is the time for the richest entertainment activities. In the Republic of China era, "all the mountain fairs and temple fairs used performances to attract traders and townspeople, either for ceremonial plays, such as for thanking the gods for curing illnesses or fulfilling vows, or for celebratory plays, such as for the river's safety, the New Year festivals in cities, the birth of a child, or celebrating longevity."[6]

2.Organizational Structure: The Triple Performance Model within the Marketplace Space-Time

The Huji Book Fair is held annually during the first lunar month, divided into three stages: the "Pre-Festival," the "Main Festival," and the "Post-Festival."[7]Among them, the Main Festival is the most lively, with the highest level of audience participation.

2.1 Pre-Festival: A Ritualized Space Constructed by the Performer Community

The period from New Year's Day to the twelfth day of the lunar month is collectively known as the "Pre-Festival." On the eleventh day, performers from various regions arrive punctually in Huji Village and lodge in local inns or in the homes of acquaintances.

That evening, they gather to engage in the following activities: "New Year's gatherings and greetings, sharing friendships, paying homage to the ancestral master, performing the 'Gazing Skyward' ritual for deceased elders; exchanging skills, previewing performances; introducing new apprentices and acknowledging lineages; strictly observing professional ethics, punishing violations; living harmoniously with kin, respecting elders and resolving disputes."[8]Over years of repeated gatherings, these activities and codes have evolved into customary traditions.

2.1.1 New Year Greetings and Introducing New Apprentices

During the Book Fair, performers who have taken in new apprentices often bring them along to introduce to their elders. In some cases, the apprenticeship ceremonies are even held directly at Huji. Within the same lineage, senior members identify one another according to generational naming conventions, symbolizing the apprentice's official entry into the performing arts profession. This system helps facilitate future mutual support among fellow performers and members of the same lineage.

2.1.2 The "Gazing Skyward" and "Sitting Court" Rituals

The "Gazing Skyward" ritual was once an essential event for performers on the evening of the eleventh day, held after paying tribute to the ancestral master—King Zhuang of Zhou.[9]Performers are expected to strictly adhere to established norms within the profession. Any breach of conduct is met with corrective actions. These disciplinary proceedings are referred to in the storytelling community as "Sitting Court." The Book Fair, when performers are all present, is a key opportunity for such disciplinary matters to be addressed.

2.1.3 Exchanging Repertoires and Previewing Performances

The Pre-Festival stage allows performers to exchange storytelling repertoires and refine their craft. New apprentices can learn from senior performers, and it also serves as an opportunity for performers to demonstrate their abilities to audiences, warming up for the upcoming Main Festival performances.

2.1.4 Mutual Support and Conflict Resolution

Performers in the folk arts tradition are known for supporting one another, especially in times of personal events such as weddings and funerals, or when facing hardships. When a senior performer passes away, apprentices will go door to door on the evening of the eleventh to inform others and bow to the elders—a custom known as "Knocking on Doors." Disputes among performers are also resolved during the fair in Huji, mediated by senior figures in the community.

2.2 Main Festival: A Carnival Space of Market Negotiation and Cultural Performance

The period from the 12th to the 16th day of the lunar month constitutes the "Main Festival," marking the climax of the Huji Book Fair. During this time, performers set up their spaces, showcase their storytelling skills, negotiate fees, and sell their performances, while crowds flock in to listen to stories and attend the bustling market. Key components of the Main Festival include setting up performance spaces, showcasing acts, negotiating engagements (referred to as "writing the book"), mutual assistance and competition among performers, and finally leaving the fair to begin village performances. Before each performance, artists typically give an opening speech to attract and engage the audience.

When performers showcase their acts, representatives from nearby villages assess and select storytellers for hire—a process known as "writing the book." Once a deal is reached, three customary practices help ensure the agreement is honored: The hiring party pays a deposit to the performer. A written note is made, listing the name of the person hiring, the amount of the deposit, the agreed fee, the number of storytelling sessions, and the name and address of the village. This note is kept by the performer. The hiring party takes a piece of the performer's equipment—such as a storytelling drum or instrument—as collateral.

On the afternoon of the 12th, hired performers travel to their respective villages, where performances begin that evening and continue until the 16th—four days and five nights, totaling thirteen sessions. The host village provides food and lodging, and the engagement ends after the final performance on the night of the 16th. Aside from the Lantern Festival on the 15th, when villages often hire storytellers, local people also engage performers for important celebratory events. At the family level, these include weddings, childbirth, academic or job promotions, and birthday celebrations for elders. At the business level, storytelling is hired to celebrate new business openings. Today, with modern communication methods, fewer performers rely on the marketplace to secure engagements.

2.3 Post-Festival: A Flexible Mechanism for Cultural Continuation

The period from the 17th to the 21st day of the lunar month is known as the "Post-Festival." If a village is satisfied with a performer's show during the Main Festival, they may renegotiate to extend the engagement. Well-known performers who are not re-hired often return to the Huji marketplace to continue selling their performances. Villages, families, or businesses still in need of storytelling acts can come to hire them. The length of performances during this stage varies, and the fees are typically lower than during the Main Festival.

3.Cultural Significance: A Mirror of Rural Society

3.1 A Living Carrier of Folk Belief

The Huji Book Fair, deeply integrated with the Lantern Festival celebrations, forms a cultural space akin to what G. William Skinner described as a "grassroots market community." In his analysis of rural market towns in North China, Skinner noted: "The standard market town is not only the node of economic exchange but also the locus of social relations and cultural rituals, forming a cohesive social network within its area of influence."[10]

Relying on the Spring Festival market held on the 12th day of the first lunar month, the Huji Book Fair embeds traditional storytelling (quyi performances) into the seasonal festival cycle, establishing a complete ritual chain of "showcasing stories – hiring performers – repaying vows." For instance, the custom of hiring storytellers to fulfill vows (huanyuan) reflects the active religious practices of the local populace: when a family recovers from illness or welcomes a new child after making a vow to deities or ancestors, they hire performers to "repay the vow through storytelling." Through narrative acts such as The Eight Immortals Celebrate a Birthday or Guanyin Bestows a Child, secular entertainment is interwoven with sacred belief. This cyclical pattern of "making a vow – repaying a vow" exemplifies Clifford Geertz's assertion that:"Cultural patterns—religious, philosophical, aesthetic—are 'programs' which provide a template for the organization of social and psychological processes."[11]

Moreover, although the "Gazing to the Sky" (wangkong) ritual has now largely faded, its historical practice powerfully expressed the sacredness of the storytelling profession. According to the Revised Gazetteer of Huimin County from the Republican era, on the night of the 11th day of the first lunar month, performers would "change into ritual attire, paint their faces, set up an altar facing southwest, burn offerings and worship ancestors, and perform Nuo dances to expel evil."[12] This embodied performance merged the veneration of Zhou Zhuangwang (regarded as the founding deity of quyi arts) with the commemoration of departed souls, constructing a triple-layered belief system connecting "humans – gods – ancestors." Such rituals were not merely artistic acts, but reflections of the "rites of passage"[13]within rural society. Through liminal experiences—like performing Nuo dances—everyday order was temporarily suspended, allowing the reconstruction of performers' professional identity and cultural authority.

3.2 Rural Narratives of Moral Instruction

The storytelling repertoires at the Book Fair, such as The Case of Judge Bao and The Generals of the Yang Family,subtly convey Confucian ethics through narrative templates emphasizing "honest officials delivering justice" and themes of "loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness."

For example, in Judge Bao: The Execution of Chen Shimei the performer uses formulaic lyrics like "The iron-faced judge discerns the loyal from the treacherous, with Wang Chao, Ma Han standing on either side," to portray Bao Zheng as the embodiment of justice. The dramatic climax—Bao executing his own son-in-law—satisfies the public's yearning for judicial fairness while simultaneously resonating with Michel Foucault's theory of "discursive practices": power constructs moral standards through narrative, leading audiences to unconsciously accept norms such as "loyalty over love" and "law above authority."[14]This narrative structure exemplifies what Pierre Bourdieu called "symbolic violence": "Symbolic violence is the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity."

The performers' strategies further reinforced the moral and didactic function of the storytelling. For example, Xihe Dagushu performer Li Hongbin jokingly opened his performance with: "We'll pick up where we left off—getting more exciting as we go. Don't be fooled by me being over fifty; I've still got plenty of energy!"[15]This kind of front stage performance—a term borrowed from Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory—wraps serious ethical themes in a form of entertainment through

humorous banter and interactive teasing, thereby reducing the preachy tone and increasing audience receptivity.[16]Meanwhile, the stylized gestures of shou-yan-shen-fa-bu (hand, eyes, body, method, steps)—such as stroking the beard to show loyalty or flinging sleeves to denounce treachery—serve as repeated bodily symbols that encode Confucian ethics into "visualized moral instruction," allowing largely illiterate rural audiences to intuitively grasp the boundaries between good and evil.

3.3 Cultural Bonds of Community Cohesion

During the Book Fair, most storytelling performances are commissioned collectively by villages. According to the Republic of China-era Gazetteer of Huimin County, "During the Lantern Festival Book Fair, about one-third of the county's villages would invite performers to tell stories.[17]Some villages hired storytellers every year without fail."

The enthusiasm for storytelling stemmed not only from economic means but also as a symbol of cultural prestige. Hiring performers could even strengthen village cohesion. Practices like door-knocking (mourning rituals among performers), mutual assistance, and conflict mediation among artists helped maintain the ethical order and professional identity of this "jianghu" performer community.

4.Contemporary Challenges: The Dual Crisis Under Modernity

In the pre-1949 era, tens of thousands of performers and spectators flocked to the Book Fair each year. Crowds were so dense that it was common to lose a shoe while jostling to watch a performance. The late 1980s marked a final peak, with the construction of the Quyi Performance Hall.[18]However, by the 1990s, the fair began to decline, and this trend became more evident in the 21st century.

4.1 Generational Disconnect and Inheritance Crisis

From a vocational perspective, past performers at the Book Fair were diverse: Over half were farmers who took up storytelling as their main occupation. Others were full-time performing artists or employees of cultural institutions who participated in state events and performed at the Book Fair. Some had storytelling as a side job—engaging in agriculture, manual labor, or retired life, occasionally performing. Younger apprentices balanced school or part-time jobs while learning storytelling, joining their mentors during the fair for hands-on learning. In terms of age distribution, prior to the 1980s, there was a balanced representation across age groups. Since the 1990s, however, the shrinking performance market and the aging audience base have led to a drastic reduction in full-time storytellers.

"Of the 100+ performers who participated in the 2010 and 2011 Book Fairs, fewer than five still rely on storytelling as a main livelihood today."[19]Although efforts by the organizing committee have brought young performers to the stage—for instance, in 2023, many young people participated in performances—the economic reality remains that storytelling alone cannot sustain a living. Most performers now treat it as a sideline, only performing when opportunities arise, rather than proactively seeking gigs as in the past.

4.2 Ritual Disappearance and the Crisis of Authenticity

The fading of the "Wangkong" ritual has weakened the identity of the performer community. State-led modes of operation have transformed what was once grounded in the "lifeworld" into a top-down form of cultural communication.

Before the 1990s, the Book Fair retained a full traditional structure: Pre-festival: ancestral worship and book display fostered the performer community. Main festival: villagers autonomously hired performers, generating market-driven cultural interaction. Post-festival: extended performances met ongoing demand. Since 2007, after full government intervention, this structure has undergone a fundamental transformation: Ritual practices in the pre-festival phase have been replaced by official evaluations. The main festival has become a top-down cultural distribution mechanism. The post-festival phase has nearly vanished due to waning grassroots demand. Although the outer form of the Book Fair still exists today, the traditional booking mechanism, performer autonomy, and ritual authenticity have been largely dismantled.

5.Protection Strategies: Balancing Preservation and Innovation

5.1 Cultural Reproduction Through "Book Fair into Schools"

To address the severe aging of storytelling performers and the shortage of new talent, Huji Town launched the "Book Fair into Schools" initiative in 2012. A Quyi Hall was established at Huji Central Primary School, where students were taught

the history and vocal techniques of Xihe Dagushu, with a strong emphasis on hands-on practice. In 2014, the Huji Book Fair introduced a "China · Huji Lantern Festival Book Fair" Newcomer Competition, providing a platform for young quyi talents to showcase their skills. During the 2016 summer vacation, a special summer class was organized, selecting promising students from earlier school activities for intensive training. Their progress was presented in the town's "Summer Cooling Book Theater" performance showcase. By 2017, with coordination between the Huji town government and the local education bureau, efforts were made to expand the "Book Fair into Schools" program to all primary schools in the area. That year, a "Quyi Child Star Award" was also added to the fourth Book Fair competition. By 2018, many young performers had emerged on the festival stage, and by 2019, the program had successfully covered all primary schools in Huji. Over one hundred students had received training in quyi with stage experience, ensuring a growing pool of young talent.[20]

5.2 Industrial Integration Through Cultural Tourism

Since 1985, the Huji Book Fair has explored industrial development, beginning with the construction of a Quyi Performance Hall and hosting free performances by renowned artists such as Liu Lanfang. Following its designation as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage item in 2006, the government strengthened its leadership by establishing dedicated administrative bodies and implementing a "government-funded" model.

In 2021, the Book Fair began its digital transformation, creating a dual model of "offline performances + online dissemination." Offline, the fair integrates intangible heritage product exhibitions with public-benefit performances. Online, it expands its audience through cross-platform live streaming. Today, the Huji Book Fair has evolved from a grassroots folk gathering into a government-coordinated cultural tourism initiative. Through branding and digital empowerment, it has achieved a modern reinterpretation of traditional cultural resources. "The Huji Book Fair also hosts exhibitions and sales of intangible heritage crafts such as clay figurines, dough sculptures, woodblock New Year prints, and paper cutting, promoting a cultural tourism development model."[1] By integrating quyi with e-commerce, the fair helps boost online sales of traditional crafts like woodblock prints, transforming cultural value into economic returns. This innovative practice aligns with the goals of rural revitalization by promoting "thriving industries."

Conclusion

The Huji Book Fair exemplifies the potential of intangible cultural heritage to empower rural revitalization. As a living tradition embedded in market culture and social rituals, it offers a valuable lens into the symbiosis of economy, art, and belief in rural China. For its revitalization to succeed, a dynamic balance must be achieved—between tradition and innovation, government support and grassroots vitality, and ritual continuity and technological integration. Only by embracing this multifaceted approach can the Huji Book Fair continue to serve as a vibrant carrier of cultural memory and a cornerstone of local identity in contemporary society.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s)declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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