

Yulin Bayin: Transformational from “Folk Ritual” to “Cultural Tourism IP”

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Abstract: Yulin Bayin, as a living embodiment of southeastern Guangxi’s folk music, is deeply rooted in traditional rituals and carries profound historical memories and cultural genes of the Lingnan region. Under the dual background of accelerated modernization and social restructuring, this ancient folk music form faces both inheritance crises and opportunities for transformation. Based on the Neo-Classical “Structure-Function Theory,” and combining existing literature and field research, this paper examines the adaptive status and developmental challenges of Yulin Bayin in contemporary society. It focuses on issues such as cultural functional adjustment, reconstruction of inheritance systems, and structural relationship transformations during its transition from a “folk ritual” to a “cultural tourism IP.” Furthermore, it proposes several academic topics worthy of in-depth exploration, aiming to provide new theoretical insights and practical references for the dynamic preservation of intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Yulin Bayin; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Neo-Classical “Structure-Function Theory”; Living Inheritance

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1.Introduction

Within the study of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) protection in China, Bronisław Malinowski’s “Cultural Functionalism” and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown’s “Structural Functionalism” have been widely adopted as two core theoretical frameworks by scholars. The former emphasizes culture’s function in satisfying specific psychological, physiological, and institutionally derived needs of individuals, while the latter views the function of cultural practices as maintaining the “stability and integration of social structures.” In light of the dynamic new social structures emerging from China’s ongoing development, scholars such as Zhang Jijiao have integrated Li Peilin’s theory of “Another Invisible Hand”, UNESCO’s “Endogenous Development” theory, and Michael Porter’s “Competitive Advantage” theory, synthesizing them to propose the Neo-Classical “Structure-Function Theory” analytical framework^[1]. This theory advocates studying intangible cultural heritage within its own survival context or social structure (i.e., external structure) to understand the essential meaning of its existence within the overall structure. Simultaneously, it is necessary to regard intangible cultural heritage as a form of “heritage actor” possessing its own agency, in order to observe its development and transformation within specific fields (i.e., endogenous structure)^[2]. From this theoretical perspective, the contemporary revitalization practices of Yulin Bayin can be interpreted as a dynamic adjustment of its endogenous cultural functions and a deep embedding within changing external structural relations. The

wisdom and underlying contradictions reflected in its developmental practices not only offer new ideas for ICH protection but also point to academic issues deserving further exploration.

2. Yulin Bayin as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Benefiting from the deepening integration of culture and tourism, Guangxi's tourism industry has shown rapid growth, with total tourism revenue exceeding one trillion yuan in 2024. The deep integration of elements such as intangible cultural heritage, rural revitalization, and ecological wellness with the tourism industry has given rise to new formats represented by "ICH markets," "red tourism study tours," and "rural leisure," initially achieving a synergistic enhancement of cultural and economic value. As a traditional wind and percussion music of Guangxi, Yulin Bayin, propelled by both policy support and folk inheritance, has begun to move beyond "niche circles" and integrate into the tourism market with a more vibrant presence. By combining with scenarios such as scenic spot performances, cultural festivals, and experiential study tours, the protection practices of Yulin Bayin have gradually shifted from mere skill preservation to diverse explorations of living inheritance and innovative development, demonstrating the potential for blending tradition with modernity.

2.1 The Historical Origins of Yulin Bayin

Yulin Bayin, also known as Southern Guangxi Bayin, is a traditional instrumental music form originating from court and military wind and drum music of the Qin and Han dynasties in China. During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, this music migrated south with central plains immigrants to the Yulin region and, through long-term evolution, incorporated elements of southeastern Guangxi folk music, forming a musical system that combines ancient central plains traditions with regional Guangxi styles^[3]. In 2007, Yulin Bayin was recognized among the first batch of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Intangible Cultural Heritage items. Subsequently, its influence continued to grow, successfully entering the National Intangible Cultural Heritage Extended Project List in 2011. As a representative of Yulin's ancient music culture, Yulin Bayin not only reflects the historical trajectory of local music but is also a precious treasure within the heritage of folk music.

Within the urban and rural areas of southeastern Guangxi, Bayin has become an indispensable part of people's lives. Whether at joyful occasions such as weddings, birthday celebrations, or full-month ceremonies, or during important moments like festivals, temple fairs, and New Year greetings, it plays a crucial role in creating atmosphere and a sense of ritual. Therefore, people often refer to Bayin as a national intangible cultural heritage hidden within the urban fabric, and music peers hail it as the "Symphony of Southeastern Guangxi." "Bayin" specifically refers to drum, gong, cymbals, flute, xiao (vertical bamboo flute), string instruments, qin (zither), and human voice. A Bayin ensemble typically consists of 6 to 8 performers, divided into seated and mobile performances. The repertoire often includes over a dozen pieces, encompassing classics such as "Eight Immortals Offering Birthday Congratulations" and "Spring Arrives." Yulin Bayin is commonly used for local residents' weddings and funerals, folk activities (e.g., Hanshan Dan, Beidi Dan), and holiday celebrations like New Year's Day. Even during non-special times, small Bayin bands can often be seen in streets and alleys, and Qingwanjiang Park occasionally hosts self-organized Bayin practice sessions. Currently, Yulin has established several Bayin inheritance bases. The content of inheritance primarily focuses on performing traditional repertoire, with a small number of innovative pieces (e.g., "Four Sons-in-Law Offering Birthday Congratulations," created under the guidance of the Yulin Cultural Center).

2.2 The Developmental Status of Yulin Bayin

Since 2023, the Yulin municipal government has focused on constructing a new development model of "ICH + Tourism." By creating a "Bayin+" cultural tourism IP, it integrates traditional instrumental performances with scenic spots, cultural and creative products, and digital dissemination, promoting Bayin's elevation from a local folk ritual to a cultural symbol with broad influence. Field investigations by the research team revealed that the Yulin municipal government's current protection and inheritance efforts for Bayin primarily revolve around three aspects. First, regular displays in museums. The Yulin Museum has dedicated sections for exhibiting Bayin historical documents, physical instruments, and audiovisual materials. Coupled with professional guided tours and digital interactive experience projects, it systematically presents a complete Bayin cultural display system, providing the public with a window to gain an in-depth understanding of this ICH item. Second, organic integration into local festival activities. Pengdong Village incorporates Bayin performances as a core element in its annual Lantern Festival "ICH Lantern Festival" event, effectively enhancing the cultural appeal of the activity. During

the “March 3rd” ethnic festival, the Kunpeng Village Music Festival achieves an organic combination of traditional music and modern cultural tourism by integrating Bayin performances into rural tourism settings. In April 2024, during the filming of the nation’s first large-scale New Folk Song live creation show “New Folk Song Assembly” in Pengdong Village and Shizi Street, Bayin was innovatively fused with elements like bronze drums and folk songs. Under the theme “Ancient Prefecture of a Millennium, Singing for a Millennium,” it showcased the contemporary vitality of traditional music. Third, creating Bayin experiential scenarios. Yulin possesses rich tourism resources. Besides existing attractions like Pengdong Ancient Village and Nangang Trendy Play Street, the Wanhua Lou Cultural Tourism Complex, officially opened in June 2024 as a key immersive tourism destination in Yulin, is planning cultural spaces including a Bayin Square and an Overseas Chinese History viewing platform. These spaces are poised to become important platforms for centrally showcasing Yulin Bayin in the future. Through on-site experiences and participatory creation, they will allow tourists to closely feel the unique charm of Bayin, enhancing their sense of identification and participation in ICH culture.

Furthermore, with its distinctive regional characteristics, Yulin Bayin has become a cultural Brand in diplomatic activities. During the 2025 Lantern Festival, diplomats and ambassadors from ten countries, including Malawi, Zambia, and Indonesia, visited Yulin. They showed keen interest in Bayin art, not only appreciating live performances but also participating in hands-on experiences with some instruments. This cross-cultural exchange has not only increased the visibility of Bayin but also injected external momentum into its preservation and inheritance. Through promotion in diplomatic activities, Yulin Bayin is gradually transitioning from a local ICH item to an international stage, becoming an artistic link connecting cultural exchanges between China and other countries.

3.The Transformation of Yulin Bayin Inheritance Practices

The repertoire creation and performance forms of Yulin Bayin are deeply rooted in the longstanding life practices of the people in southeastern Guangxi. Its dissemination and manifestation across different historical periods are not only the crystallized wisdom of historical sedimentation but also a living resource imbued with structural integrity and functional adaptability. Within the theoretical framework of Neo-Classical “Structure-Function Theory,” we can clearly observe the dynamic evolution and self-developing capacity of Yulin Bayin. It transcends simple inheritance, instead achieving synergistic development between cultural diversity and socio-economics through adaptive changes in three dimensions: cultural function, inheritance system, and social structure.

3.1 The “Dynamic Adjustment” of Cultural Function

From a cultural anthropology perspective, the vitality of intangible cultural heritage does not stem from its immutable form but is rooted in its continuous interaction and energy exchange with social life. The centuries-long inheritance practice of Yulin Bayin vividly testifies to this “living” essence. In the context of traditional rural society, Bayin, carried by clan-based music troupes, was deeply embedded in ritual scenarios such as weddings and festivals. The performance activities of the Yan Clan Bayin Troupe at weddings directly illustrate its original function as a “ritual symbol.” This embeddedness within community life constituted the endogenous foundation of its inheritance. In contemporary times, Bayin has broken through the limitations of single ritual contexts, achieving connection with modern life through the “reconstruction of cultural spaces.” The Shizi Street Culture and Art Festival integrates Bayin with elements like arcade architecture and local cuisine, making live Bayin performances a key factor in attracting crowds and creating atmosphere. The development of peripheral cultural and creative products, such as musical score bookmarks and miniature instrument ornaments, further expands the boundaries of Bayin culture dissemination. The original song “Bayin Resounds” integrates into city image promotion in a “music + imagery” format, transforming Bayin from “folk accompaniment” into a carrier of regional cultural identity. This transformation echoes the autonomous agency implied by Neo-Classical “Structure-Function Theory”: on one hand, Bayin retains core cultural genes through stable preservation of core instruments like the six-hole flute, gongs, and drums, and its bright, lively melodic characteristics; on the other hand, it accomplishes dynamic adjustment from “ritual music” to “cultural consumption symbol” through scenario development and formal innovation. This dynamism is reflected both in the intergenerational evolution of instrument forms and playing techniques, and in the extension of contexts from clan rituals to cultural tourism performances, from local knowledge to cross-cultural exchange. Through continuous adaptation, circulation,

and interaction, Bayin consistently aligns with social and human needs, exploring a self-renewal logic of “resonating with social development,” thereby finding a balance between originality and adaptability.

3.2 The “Two-way Empowerment” of the Inheritance System

Historically, the inheritance of Yulin Bayin primarily relied on two core systems: first, the emotional bonds formed through intergenerational transmission based on blood and geographical ties within clans; second, the master-apprentice skill transmission system characterized by “oral instruction and mental assimilation.” This model operated effectively within relatively closed and stable social environments, but its motivational structure was relatively singular, with weak risk resistance. In contemporary times, the inheritance and development of Yulin Bayin have evolved into a multi-motivational landscape composed of both “endogenous drive” and “external empowerment.” From the endogenous perspective, the folk consensus that “it’s better to have less banquet than to lack Bayin” still maintains cultural identity. The accompaniment provided in various celebrations, rituals, and community folk activities like dragon and lion dances continues the production and dissemination chain of Bayin. The existence of religious music troupes and numerous folk Bayin teams, such as the Diaoma Village Bayin Team and the Zhoupei Community Bayin Team, is itself evidence of the flow of local knowledge within communities. From the external empowerment perspective, the government provides institutional support through cultural and art festivals, “ICH in Schools” activities, etc. Artists and designers integrate Bayin’s instrument forms and decorative symbols into the exterior design of audio products, realizing the transformation of artistic value into practical value. The involvement of professional institutions and talents promotes the innovation and enhancement of Bayin — for instance, composer Wang Qiaolin from the Guangxi Mass Art Center, after conducting fieldwork in Yulin, created “Four Sons-in-Law Offering Birthday Congratulations,” which incorporates Bayin elements. This piece has repeatedly won awards in major competitions and has become a representative work for Bayin dissemination. This multi-stakeholder collaborative governance platform breaks the limitations of previous single models dominated either by the “government” or “spontaneous folk efforts,” constructing a two-way empowering “cultural ecological community.” This means the inheriting community retains discourse power over the cultural essence, while the government and professional groups provide resources and technical support, forming a governance structure where “internal identity activates inheritance momentum, and external resources strengthen inheritance resilience,” injecting lasting impetus into the sustainable development of Bayin.

3.3 The “Deep Embedding” of Structural Relations

The dilemma of modern ICH inheritance does not lie within traditional communities themselves but in the transformation of their external context, including the establishment of modern systems, leading to a disconnect between the two^[4]. Therefore, besides maintaining the original cultural inheritance mechanisms, protection work needs to address the interface between traditional culture and modern systems. The contemporary adaptation of Yulin Bayin has achieved an upgrade and expansion of its own value. It has evolved from primarily being a “representation” and “carrier” of regional culture in the past to becoming an active resource capable of catalyzing the “symbiosis” of multiple values — economic, social, and cultural. This leap transforms ICH protection from an undertaking focused on “preservation” into a development engine capable of generating comprehensive benefits. Economically, Bayin accomplishes value transformation through the integration of culture, commerce, and tourism. During the Cross Street Festival, Bayin performance was integrated with food consumption and cultural product sales, which not only enhanced the region’s cultural tourism appeal but also generated direct income for the music troupe, creating a virtuous cycle of ‘industry nurturing heritage’. Socially, Bayin has become a link connecting urban and rural emotions. The dissemination of musical works like “Bayin Resounds” provides emotional belonging for Yulin natives living far from their hometown. The Hanshan Dan temple fair and various cultural performances enrich grassroots public cultural life in the region, strengthening community cohesion. Culturally, Bayin not only serves as an important window for showcasing Lingnan culture in various domestic cultural exchange activities but also conveys the charm of Chinese traditional music to the world through the “Guangxi-ASEAN” platform. Its very inheritance is a living continuation of the ritual music culture, folk traditions, and historical memory of southeastern Guangxi. It is precisely by continuing traditional skills in the cultural dimension, achieving inclusive development in the economic dimension, and promoting emotional identity in the social dimension that Yulin Bayin accomplishes deep “embedding” within the local social structure.

This value shift responds to the cultural empowerment theory within Neo-Classical “Structure-Function Theory”: leveraging the power of modern transformation of excellent cultural heritage to promote endogenous local economic development.

4. Hidden Concerns in the Living Inheritance of Yulin Bayin

The contemporary revitalization practices of Yulin Bayin are a vivid microcosm of folk music seeking cultural survival and self-development in a new social environment. Its “dynamic adjustment of cultural functions,” “two-way empowerment of the inheritance system,” and “deep embedding of structural relations” provide systematic inspiration for ICH protection from theory to practice. However, this transformational path is not without obstacles. The conflicts it highlights between cultural authenticity and innovation, between inheriting subjects and objects, and between traditional spaces and modern scenarios still require further exploration and resolution in the future.

4.1 The Boundaries of Cultural Adjustment: The Developmental Paradox Between Formal Innovation and Essential Alienation

Bayin faces the core paradox of “variability” versus “originality” in its cross-boundary transformation. As Bayin transitions from wedding rituals to commercial performances, and from the improvisational playing of folk troupes to staged, choreographed performances, will its ritual attributes gradually dissipate? Ma Guoqing points out that under the influence of the cultural and creative industries, market-oriented ICH faces the dilemma of seeking quick success and instant benefits. Over-commercialization may reduce ICH to “hollow art,” possessing form but lacking spirit^[5]. The current scenario expansion of Bayin already shows a tendency of “weakening ritual music and strengthening performance attributes,” raising concerns about the alienation of Bayin’s essence. What are the core characteristics of Bayin that cannot be stripped away — the instrument combination, melodic patterns, or cultural connotations? Where are the boundaries of commercial transformation? How can a dynamic evaluation mechanism be established to prevent cultural adjustment from leading to alienation? To navigate this, establishing a set of core criteria for “authentic” practice, coupled with continuous community consultation, is crucial for monitoring commercialization impacts.

4.2 Overcoming the Inheritance Gap: Cultural Identity and Participation Difficulties Among the Younger Generation

Affected by both social development and population mobility, the core inheritors of Yulin Bayin (e.g., Zhang Yaodong, Pang Weiyuan) belong to the middle-aged and elderly demographic, most having been engaged in Bayin performance for over thirty years. The younger generation shows low enthusiasm for participating in Bayin inheritance due to reasons such as high academic pressure, low social recognition, and few vested interests. Additionally, roles within Bayin troupes are not fixed; each member typically needs to master multiple instruments and memorize dozens of commonly used pieces, requiring high memory capacity and practice time, resulting in relatively high technical barriers to inheritance. Existing research often focuses on the survival status and formal innovation of music troupes but seldom delves into analyzing the cultural cognition of the younger generation. For instance, what is the level of understanding of Bayin among the younger generation? Does its “traditional” label constitute an obstacle to acceptance? Can digital dissemination and cross-boundary integration effectively attract youth participation? Potential strategies include integrating Bayin into school curricula, offering structured mentorship programs, and leveraging popular digital platforms to rebrand it as a dynamic cultural activity.

4.3 The Reconstruction of Cultural Space: The Challenge of “Enclave” Protection in an Urbanization Context

The original cultural space of Bayin is the clan society and agrarian life of southeastern Guangxi, and the urbanization process is causing this space to continuously dissolve. Although new scenarios like Shizi Street and Wanhua Lou achieve spatial substitution, this “artificially created cultural space” differs fundamentally in function and atmosphere from the original context. Bayin performances in rural weddings are an indispensable part of the ritual, often accompanied by community activities like clan gatherings and neighborhood mutual aid. In contrast, Bayin in commercial performances is more of a “cultural embellishment,” with audiences mostly participating as “spectators,” lacking emotional resonance and deep identification. This inevitably raises new questions: What impacts have changes in cultural space had on the functional attributes of Bayin? How can the “cultural ecosystem” essential for its survival be protected and reconstructed? Is the “enclave

protection” model of building a Bayin square in the urban core suitable for Bayin inheritance? Moving beyond isolated cultural enclaves, fostering community-embedded cultural hubs that combine performance, education, and social functions could help bridge the authenticity gap.

4.4 The Transformation of Inheritance Subjects: The Survival Crisis and Identity Transition of Clan Music Troupes

Clan-based music troupes were once the core carriers of Bayin inheritance. Jiang Xie’s investigation shows that the Yan Clan Bayin Troupe in Zhangmu Town was a locally influential religious music troupe, with its organizational operation and performance norms deeply bound to the clan system^[6]. However, with the weakening of clan influence and increasing population mobility, traditional troupes face issues like member loss and organizational looseness. To adapt to the demands of commercial performances, some troupes have begun incorporating non-clan members, gradually diluting their “clan attributes” and weakening Bayin’s function as a “community bond.” This will trigger a series of subsequent questions: What impact does the dissolution of clan troupes have on the transmission of Bayin’s local knowledge? What differences exist between new commercialized troupes and traditional clan troupes in terms of skill transmission and cultural expression? How can the stability of inheritance subjects and the authenticity of cultural expression be maintained amidst changing social structures? Supporting hybrid models where troupes retain elder masters as cultural custodians while formalizing training systems for new members may help preserve core knowledge during transition.

In the future, with the deepening intervention of digital technology and the ongoing transformation of social structures, Bayin inheritance will face more uncertainties while also containing new possibilities, such as reconstructing original cultural scenes through virtual reality technology and breaking intergenerational communication barriers via social media. Regardless, its core challenge will always lie in balancing the “internal” and the “external”: it needs to embrace external innovation with an open attitude while steadfastly guarding the core characteristics of the cultural essence. The various issues mentioned above urgently require responses through field research and empirical studies to provide theoretical support for the positive interaction between ICH protection and social development.

5. Conclusion

Examined from the perspective of Neo-Classical “Structure-Function Theory,” the transformational process of Yulin Bayin from “folk ritual” to “cultural tourism IP” vividly illustrates the vitality of intangible cultural heritage. Bayin does not exist merely to satisfy the needs of specific individuals or groups; the key to its survival lies in its role as a “structural node” embedded within the social structure and maintaining collective identity. Its process of adjustment is a direct reflection of adapting to the transformation of social structure. Therefore, ICH protection practices need to break away from the mindset of static preservation and shift towards a methodology emphasizing systemic integration and dynamic adaptation. This means that while guiding diverse social forces to participate, full attention must also be paid to the inherent self-renewal capacity of ICH — that is, its potential to achieve formal evolution, structural optimization, and functional reshaping amidst changes in the external environment. Through rational development and revitalizing utilization, such reactivated cultural resources have the potential to transform into endogenous drivers for local development, promoting mutual benefit and progress among ICH survival, industrial upgrading, and the construction of modern civilization.

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