

Current Status and Dynamic Inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: This paper will delve into the current situation and dynamic inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, aiming to explore new development paths for Huaiyang Nini Dog. We hope that through this research, we can inject new vitality into the national-level intangible cultural heritage Huaiyang Nini Dog, so that it can be better inherited and developed in contemporary society.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, Dynamic Inheritance, Huaiyang Nini Dog

1. Introduction

China boasts abundant intangible cultural heritage resources, which contain the essence of excellent traditional Chinese culture and serve as an important cornerstone for promoting the construction of a culturally strong nation and enhancing cultural confidence. Currently, the national protection strategy for intangible cultural heritage is transitioning from “static preservation” to “dynamic protection,” aiming to rejuvenate traditional culture in modern society. Huaiyang Nini Dog, as a unique traditional folk craft in Huaiyang District, Henan Province, has been included in the national list of intangible cultural heritage. However, the protection and inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog are facing significant challenges. Like many other intangible cultural heritage projects, its survival is precarious, with the risk of even being phased out.

Therefore, this study starts from the perspective of intangible cultural heritage to thoroughly analyze the current situation and dynamic inheritance issues of Huaiyang Nini Dog. We will comprehensively understand the historical origins, production techniques, current status of inheritance, and challenges faced by Huaiyang Nini Dog through field investigations, interviews with inheritors, and reviewing relevant literature. Based on this foundation, we will further explore how to effectively protect and inherit Huaiyang Nini Dog, propose specific strategies and suggestions, and inject new vitality into it, promoting its inheritance and development in contemporary society.

This study not only focuses on the protection and inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog itself but also hopes to provide valuable references and insights for the protection and inheritance of other intangible cultural heritage through this typical case. We believe that through the collective efforts and wisdom of society as a whole, the precious intangible cultural heritage of Huaiyang Nini Dog will surely rejuvenate and thrive under new historical conditions, making greater contributions to the inheritance and development of Chinese culture.

2. Current Status and Issues of Development of Huaiyang Nini Dog

Intangible cultural heritage, abbreviated as “ICH,” refers to various traditional cultural expressions passed down from generation to generation by all ethnic groups, which are considered important components of their cultural heritage, along with related tangible objects and sites. China’s intangible cultural heritage resources are rich and imbued with the essence of excellent traditional Chinese culture, serving as a key carrier for promoting the construction of a culturally strong nation and enhancing cultural confidence. Huaiyang Nini Dog, as a traditional artistic treasure of Huaiyang District in Henan Province, was included in the second batch of provincial-level intangible cultural heritage list of Henan Province in June 2009. Subsequently, on November 11, 2014, the art of clay sculpture (Huaiyang Nini Dog) was gloriously included in the fourth batch of national-level intangible cultural heritage list with the approval of the State Council. This traditional art form not only represents the profound cultural heritage of the Huaiyang region but also shines as a brilliant pearl in the treasure trove of Chinese intangible cultural heritage.

2.1. Current Development Status of Huaiyang Nini Dog

In early 2018, when Premier Li Keqiang visited the area, he expressed high appreciation for the traditional craft of Huaiyang Nini Dog. As a representative inheritor of the fifth batch of provincial-level intangible cultural heritage in Henan Province, Mr. Shao Bo, Chairman of the Huaiyang District Nini Dog Association, has long been committed to the research and inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of Nini Dog and the development of art skills. He has established the Huaiyang Nini Dog Intangible Cultural Heritage and Artistic Skills Training Institute. For more than twenty years, Mr. Shao Bo has not only adhered to traditional production techniques but also continuously explored innovation. While maintaining the original shape and artistic expression of Nini Dog, he boldly introduced pottery firing techniques, using clay as raw material and adopting ceramic hollowing processes. This innovative approach not only makes Nini Dog more sturdy and lightweight but also greatly enhances the stability of its colors, elevating both its collection and artistic value to new heights. During the Beijing Winter Olympics, the “Winter Olympics” themed Nini Dog created by Mr. Shao Bo received widespread praise and was deeply loved by the public.

In 2023, the School of Journalism and Communication of Zhoukou Normal University organized the “Cultural Arts Going to the Countryside, Journey of Nini Dog” summer social practice activities. The practice team went to Huaiyang District, Zhoukou City, and visited the studio of Shao Bo, the master of colored clay sculpture Nini Dog. Through various forms such as photos and videos, they thoroughly recorded the unique charm of Nini Dog culture. With the continuous strengthening of national support and protection for the cultural industry, in 2015, Mr. Zhang Huawei, a member of the Chinese Folk Artists Association, was also awarded the title of representative inheritor of intangible cultural heritage by the Zhoukou Municipal Government. He founded the “Xi Huang Ceramic Art Studio” and became an exemplary figure in inheriting culture and starting his own business. His “Zhang’s Nini Dog” brand gradually gained prominence in the market and was favored by a large number of consumers.

To further promote and carry forward the culture of Huaiyang Nini Dog, the Huaiyang Tourism Bureau regularly organizes Nini Dog-making competitions for inheritors, inviting inheritors such as Xu Shuzhang, Xia Mingyue, and Mu Guangke to visit campuses and explain the historical origins, production techniques, and cultural connotations of Nini Dog to students, enabling this traditional art form to be inherited and carried forward among the younger generation.

2.2. Challenges Facing Huaiyang Nini Dog

As a treasure among China's abundant intangible cultural heritage, Huaiyang Nini Dog, with its unique form and exaggerated patterns, carries the deep reverence people have held for reproductive culture for thousands of years. However, while the progress of the times has brought about many changes, it has also inadvertently eroded the environment on which intangible cultural heritage relies for survival. This type of intangible cultural heritage, which depends on inner perception, is gradually fading away, losing its original essence, and transforming into treasures in the hands of collectors.

Currently, the protection and inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog face significant challenges. In contemporary society, people's interest in Nini Dog is diminishing, leading to few individuals willing to actively learn this traditional skill. Like many other intangible cultural heritage projects, inheritors of Nini Dog also face severe discontinuity issues. As pointed out by Editor-in-Chief Zhou Hongjun in the "Henan Art and Culture Yearbook" (1996), Nini Dog faces difficulties in entering the market smoothly due to problems such as relatively crude production techniques, difficulty in preservation and transportation. Addressing these issues requires strong support and guidance from the government. [1]

While adhering to ancient traditions is undoubtedly a major advantage of Nini Dog, it also limits its development space, making it difficult to escape the fate of being phased out.

3. Research Value of Huaiyang Nini Dog

Huaiyang Nini Dog, also known as "Ling Dog," is the collective term for clay toys at the Taihao Fuxi Mausoleum in Huaiyang District. Its style is quaint and peculiar, embodying both simplicity and antiquity. This unique artistic form originated from the time of Fuxi and was initially an object of worship for people's sacrifices, gradually evolving into an art form. Its profound cultural connotations and unique artistic value have made Huaiyang Nini Dog an important part of China's intangible cultural heritage.

Huaiyang Nini Dog is the general term for clay toys at the Taihao Mausoleum "Ren Zu Hui" in Huaiyang District, Zhoukou City, Henan Province. It originated from primitive totem culture and is a unique folk art form. Its themes are wide-ranging, covering birds in the sky and beasts on the ground, with surreal and mysterious shapes. Among these various bizarre forms, there are endless peculiar images such as nine-headed birds, human-headed dogs, human-faced fish, monkey-headed swallows, and many other abstract, deformed composite monsters, totaling about 200 varieties. These images are not only imaginative but also full of mystery, fully showcasing the artistic charm of Huaiyang Nini Dog.

The shaping and painting of Huaiyang Nini Dog are closely related to the purpose of ancestor worship, entertaining gods, and praying for offspring. Its decorative patterns are essentially abstract transformations of reproductive symbols, and these symbolic patterns are an intuitive reflection of its connotations. The core of the connotation of Nini Dog lies in reproduction, reflecting the ancient people's desire and pursuit for the continuation of life. The emergence and development of Huaiyang Nini Dog profoundly reflect the ancient people's outlook on life and belief system, which is of great significance for understanding ancient social culture.

The production techniques and artistic expressions of Huaiyang Nini Dog are equally worthy of in-depth study. Its traditional craftsmanship and use of colors possess unique artistic value. Through research, we can gain a deeper understanding of its production techniques and artistic characteristics, providing inspiration and reference for modern artistic creation. Ni Baocheng pointed out in his collection of essays that in the 1950s, Huaiyang Nini Dog began to produce modern-type works. The characteristics of these works lie in folk artists drawing inspiration from real life, with themes derived from daily life while still retaining the distinctive artistic features of Huaiyang Nini Dog. These

modern-type Nini Dog sculptures are vivid, with exaggerated yet casual forms, and the characters are solemn and steady, possessing a sense of modern sculpture. It is worth noting that these works already exhibit “personalized” features, breaking through the principles of traditional folk art’s reverence for gods and regional group consensus under specific concepts, demonstrating a unique artistic style.

Furthermore, Huaiyang Nini Dog also holds research value in multiple fields such as history and folklore. Through the study of Huaiyang Nini Dog, we can glimpse into the historical background, cultural customs, and artistic development of ancient society, providing valuable clues and evidence for our understanding of ancient society. Therefore, in-depth research on Huaiyang Nini Dog not only contributes to the promotion of the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage but also enriches our knowledge of historical culture and artistic aesthetic experience.

4. Living Heritage Inheritance Path of Huaiyang Nini Dog from the Perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Since the concept of intangible cultural heritage was initially established at the beginning of the 21st century, with the deepening understanding of intangible cultural heritage, its protection methods have gradually shifted from “static preservation” to “living protection.” Living inheritance, also known as “activation,” originally originated in the field of natural sciences and was later borrowed and developed by the humanities and social sciences, forming the current concept of “heritage activation.” Yin Jingqi pointed out in “Innovation Path and Practice of Digital Inheritance of Local Intangible Cultural Heritage” that the integration of digital technology and intangible cultural heritage has brought new opportunities for the preservation, protection, promotion, inheritance, and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage. The vigorous development and popularization of next-generation digital technology provide a broad platform for the inheritance of local intangible cultural heritage, and in the future, intangible cultural heritage will revitalize its vitality through digital forms. [2]

Xu Siyue also mentioned in “Exploration of the ‘Living’ Protection Approach of Intangible Cultural Heritage—Taking Chinese Animation Films as an Example” that the current understanding of intangible cultural heritage has surpassed the level of “cultural remnants” and focuses more on exploring its “living” protection path. Previous traditional “static protection” measures, such as oral tradition text records and museum exhibitions of traditional handicrafts, often disconnected intangible cultural heritage from its “cultural space,” severed its connection with life, and severed ties with inheritors. [3] Therefore, we must start from the inherent characteristics of intangible cultural heritage, organically combine principles of life, innovation, integrity, human-centeredness, and education, ensuring that the protected objects not only survive but also maintain their “vitality.” Based on this, we should broaden the scope of protection and actively explore more effective protection approaches.

Currently, research on the inheritance approaches and methods of Huaiyang Nini Dog has achieved certain results. Wang Lidan, in “Analysis of Huaiyang Nini Dog Information Visualization Design,” explores how to keep this intangible cultural heritage project pace with the times. By exploring the visual expression forms of abstract information, she digs out and disseminates its potential value, and utilizes technology and design means to bridge the gap between people, information, and culture, which has become an important topic in the new era. [4] Yuan Lijia, in “Exploration of Huaiyang Nini Dog Book Design from the Perspective of Leisure Aesthetics,” mentioned that as a living relic of ancient culture, in today’s society with rapid development of information technology, in addition to inheriting its essence, Nini Dog should also combine with contemporary factors for design innovation to make it more in line with contemporary aesthetics, thereby reducing the resistance to inheritance. [5]

Kang Hongchang, in “Feasibility Study of Huaiyang Nini Dog Cartoon Modeling Development,” conducted in-depth research on the cartoon modeling of Nini Dog, integrating traditional culture with fashionable elements, deeply exploring its cultural connotations, and studying the modeling and

aesthetic characteristics of Nini Dog. [6] According to the laws of cartoon modeling and the principles of constituting art, he conducted research and practice on the cartoon modeling of Nini Dog, providing practical and feasible approaches for the protection of handcrafted intangible cultural heritage such as Nini Dog. These studies not only enrich the theoretical system of intangible cultural heritage protection but also provide useful references and insights for the living inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog.

The living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage is a multidimensional and comprehensive system that cannot rely solely on isolated methods and means but requires various means to complement and coordinate with each other. For the living inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog, its methods mainly include the following aspects:

4.1. Living Continuation of Traditional Folk Customs

The living continuation of traditional folk customs is the cornerstone of the living inheritance of cultural heritage. Huaiyang, formerly known as “Wanqiu” and “Chen,” is the place where the humanistic ancestor, Emperor Taihao Fuxi, established his capital and final resting place. Over 6,500 years ago, Emperor Taihao Fuxi initiated the Chinese civilization here. Today, every year from the second day of the second lunar month to the third day of the third lunar month, the Huaiyang Taihao Mausoleum Ancestors’ Temple Fair is held as scheduled, attracting people from surrounding areas to worship the ancestral Fuxi. During the temple fair, Nini Dogs, as black-based clay toys, are highly favored, carrying the totem culture of the ancient Fuxi clan. However, with the rapid development of society, this traditional folk activity is gradually declining. As a traditional folk craft intangible cultural heritage, Huaiyang Nini Dog cannot exist in isolation from folk activities. Therefore, the local cultural and tourism department should join hands with the government to enhance the promotion of related folk activities and create a new model of “intangible cultural heritage + cultural tourism.” Establishing a folk customs experience area in Huaiyang allows tourists to personally experience local traditional folk customs, thereby achieving the living inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog.

4.2. Cultural Heritage Education

Successors are the prerequisite for realizing the living inheritance of intangible cultural heritage and the key to demonstrating the enduring charm of intangible cultural heritage. Governments at all levels should attach importance to intangible cultural heritage education and teaching, enrich activity forms, pay attention to the extensibility of activities, guide young people to deeply understand the connotation of intangible cultural heritage, and enhance their consciousness and initiative in inheriting and promoting excellent traditional culture. Specifically, intangible cultural heritage education should be incorporated into the school education system, allowing intangible cultural heritage to enter and reside in schools. Regarding the inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog, local schools, especially primary and secondary schools, should actively carry out related activities. These activities may include organizing lectures or workshops, inviting Nini Dog artists to campuses to impart their skills; establishing Nini Dog clubs to encourage students to delve into research, production, and sharing of Nini Dog works; organizing Nini Dog exhibitions and display events to allow more teachers and students to appreciate this unique art form; integrating Nini Dog into subjects such as fine arts, history, or cultural studies, enabling students to understand and explore Nini Dog culture during their learning process; providing materials and support for making Nini Dogs, encouraging students to practice hands-on, and fostering their creativity and practical abilities.

4.3. Development of Cultural Creativity and Digital Dissemination Industry for Intangible Cultural Heritage

Digital technology provides new opportunities for the recording, protection, and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. With the help of new technologies such as VR and 3D modeling simulation, the digital influence of intangible cultural heritage can be enhanced. On the one hand, we can use methods such as knowledge graphs, user profiles, and self-media to virtualize intangible cultural heritage, promote the industrialization of intangible cultural heritage, and enhance the attractiveness of intangible heritage projects. On the other hand, based on artificial intelligence technology, fully leveraging the real-life interactive functions of VR and other technologies allows enthusiasts of intangible cultural heritage to experience the charm of intangible cultural heritage skills firsthand. At the same time, taking Huaiyang Nini Dog as a source of cultural creativity, develop culturally distinctive creative products. In the research and development process of cultural and creative products, it is necessary to adhere to the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage, avoid excessive modernization and urbanization, and ensure the design of truly valuable and characteristic cultural creative products.

5. Conclusion

Huaiyang Nini Dog, as a national-level intangible cultural heritage, exhibits extremely high research significance from the perspectives of historical value, aesthetic value, and cultural value. Currently, the digital inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage have become the focus of research, promoting the transformation of intangible cultural heritage from traditional, passive, static, observational, and partial display methods to modern, interactive, dynamic, experiential, and comprehensive display modes. Injecting new vitality through active inheritance revitalizes Huaiyang Nini Dog in contemporary society.

Specifically, the application of digital technology not only provides new pathways for the preservation and inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog but also creates conditions for its dissemination and promotion in modern society. Through digital means, we can present the production process, technical characteristics, and cultural connotations of Huaiyang Nini Dog to the public in a more vivid and intuitive way, enabling more people to understand and recognize this intangible cultural heritage. Additionally, digital technology can help us establish digital archives for Huaiyang Nini Dog, providing valuable materials for subsequent research and inheritance.

Furthermore, active inheritance methods are crucial for revitalizing Huaiyang Nini Dog in contemporary society. By organizing cultural activities, exhibitions, seminars, etc., more people can participate in the production and inheritance of Huaiyang Nini Dog, experiencing its unique charm and value firsthand. Collaborating with educational institutions, cultural organizations, etc., to incorporate Huaiyang Nini Dog into the education system and cultural activities can further promote and inherit this intangible cultural heritage.

In conclusion, the digital inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage, as well as the application of active inheritance methods, provide strong support for revitalizing Huaiyang Nini Dog in contemporary society. In the future, we should continue to explore and innovate in the methods of intangible cultural heritage inheritance, allowing Huaiyang Nini Dog, this precious cultural heritage, to be passed down and developed for generations to come.

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