Preserving and Inheriting the Traditional Culture of Xibe in the Digital Age

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Abstract: Xibe culture has a rich historical background and unique cultural elements, including socio-cultural practices such as language, religion, and sports. Xibe culture is being jeopardized by the rapid development of modern technology and widespread mainstream culture through online platforms, and thus is facing the risk of being assimilated or even disappeared by the mainstream culture. However, digital media should not be viewed as a threat to national cultural heritage, but rather a tool in the process of cultural protection and inheritance. The article introduces some of the unique aspects of Xibe culture, and explores the possible role of social media and other digital platforms in protecting Xibe culture, and refers to successful cases of culture preservation involving digital technology. In addition, this paper suggests that various strategies should be adopted. This includes collaborative efforts between the government and the community to support appropriate cultural revitalization projects; at the same time, innovative conservation methods are highlighted, such as the use of virtual reality technology to recreate traditional environments and experiences, and the development of cultural and creative products with elements of Xibe culture. In this way, we can ensure that the unique cultural characteristics of the Xibe people will not be marginalized or forgotten due to the changes of the times.

Keywords: Xibe, ethnic culture, digital age, cultural revitalization

1.   Introduction

The Xibe people is among the 56 ethnic minority groups in China. It originated in Liaoning Province, northeast China and can also be found in Xinjiang nowadays as a result of their historical migration [1]. Throughout the historical development of the Xibe, its people not only defended on the border of their homeland, but also managed to preserve its unique cultural elements, such as the religion of Xilimama, and its folklore music and stories, all of which have contributed greatly to the diversity of Chinese ethnic culture. Therefore, preserving and inheriting the culture and spirit of the Xibe has become one of the essential concerns to uphold China's enriched ethnic culture, especially in the digital age. In this modernizing world, social media platforms provide a myriad of ways to introduce the minority group to the dominant culture. On the one hand, inevitably put the culture of the minority group in the risk of being assimilated and even disappear into the mainstream [2]. Nonetheless, the development of digital media should not be regarded as a mere enemy of the preservation of ethnic culture, but rather can be taken advantage of in the process of protecting and preserving the unique culture of the Xibe. This paper aims to explore the ways to preserve and inherit the Xibe culture in

the digital age. It will start by introducing the uniqueness of the Xibe culture, including its language, religion and literature, and discuss the challenges of the preservation of the Xibe culture under the modernized age. Then it will move on to discuss the possible roles of social media and other digital platforms in the strategies of preserving the Xibe culture by drawing on a few case studies for reference. Finally, the paper will conclude with the future prospect of the preservation and inheritance of the Xibe culture and some final thoughts on this specific issue.

2. Historical Context of the Xibe Culture

2.1. History and Distribution of the Xibe People

Xibes originated from the Liaoning Province located in the northeast of China, and came under the Manchu rule in the late sixteenth century. The Xibes were a kin ethnic group of the Man people and was known for their warrior spirits. From the late seventeenth century, the Manchu emperor relocated thousands of Xibe soldiers from their homeland to what is now Xinjiang Uigur Autonomy Region, the northwest border of China to defend for their country. The relocated Xibe people passed through Beijing, Inner Mongolia and arrived eventually at the bank of Illi River and settled.

This great migration gave the Xibes exposures to other ethnic groups in China, such as Han, Uigur and Mongols, which contribute in turn to the Xibe culture. Such contact with other ethnic group thus separated the Xibes who migrated all the way to the west from those who remained at the northeast of the country [3]. According to Olson, the northwestern Xibes are more conservative compared with their northeastern counterpart, largely because while the latter had been surrounded by the Han, the only non-minority ethnic group in China and had, little by little, been assimilated with the Han culture, the former remained rather isolated in Xinjiang and therefore preserved much of their original cultural aspects. The two groups of Xibe people also differs in terms of their lifestyles. Olson observes that the Liaoning Xibe people had replaced traditional hunting with more modern, up-to-date agriculture that had been incorporated into China's national economy, whereas the Xinjiang Xibe people remain dependent on hunting as a livelihood.

2.2. Key Cultural Aspects of the Xibe People

With its unique history and contact with other ethnic groups, the Xibe people had succeed in forming their own invaluable ethnic culture. The Xibe people, having no original written systems of their own, adapted the written alphabets from the Man language [4]. Currently there are about 30,000 people still speaking the Xibe language and these Xibe speakers mainly inhabit in Xinjiang and are mostly the direct descendants of those who migrated from Liaoning to the west in the seventeenth century. According to Tong, choosing and adapting from the Man language is prompted by several reasons, among which is the adaptability of the Xibe people. The Xibe people had been a historically minority and had developed great flexibility to come into contact with other ethnic groups. As Xibe soldiers were relocated, their settlements became smaller and scattered, which provided advantage for the Xibe people to be exposed to Man culture, a dominating ethnic group at that time because the emperors are of Man origin. However, the Man rulers ordered the Man people to be assimilated with the Han culture, and Man language was gradually replaced. Nonetheless, Xibe people, being surrounding and submerged in Man culture, adapted Man language for their own use, and had finished the adapting process before their great migration to the west. Over the course of history, the Xibe people had contributed greatly in translating Chinese classics and religious documents into and from Man language. The Xibe's adaptation of the Man language demonstrated their inclusiveness and tolerance toward other cultures.

Besides language, the Xibe people have their own religious practices. One major religious figure is the Xilimama, which have evolved to the practice of hanging a long rope across the ceiling of a

Xibe household with hanging objects symbolizing the significant happenings in the family, such as the birth of a child. The origin of the Xilimama is still unresolved. One version of the story was that in prehistorical times when men were responsible for hunting and women taking care of children in the settlements, a girl named Xili saved the the elderly and the children in the village with her wisdom. The girl's heroic act moved the Jade Emperor (Yu di) and was named as the goddess who protects the households. Nowadays, there are still Xibe family who upholds this tradition by hanging two ropes across their ceiling and tying various objects for different family events.

Music is another significant aspect of the Xibe culture, according to Yin and Liu [5], the development of Xibe music can be divided into three stages, marked by their recognition with different cultures. The most ancient form of Xibe music is the oral tradition, followed by their first recognition with Man. After Xibe being incorporated into the Banner System during the Qing dynasty, it was to some extent forced to recognize with Man language and culture, which prompted the Xibe music tradition from being passed down through oral tradition to through the language of Man. Thus Chinese classics are translated into Man language and performed among different ethnic groups. "Read said", or nian shuo, is type of performing art passed down from this stage of development, in which a long, rhymed text is read aloud or sung by the performer, and involves considerable interaction from the audience. As the Man ruling broke down, the Xibe people came to recognize with their regional music tradition, adopting dance performances from the northeastern China. They inherited the music feature of some northeastern musical tradition and developed their own ethnic performance. In the last century, the two major Xibe groups have gained more contact with each other, and in this process, the two groups both absorbs from the other in terms of their music tradition, as a way of recognizing with their own ethnic culture.

Xibe people are also renowned for their sports. Originally a hunting minority, the Xibe have developed skillful riding and archery, as well as wrestling. At the very beginning, archery was only part of the livelihood of the Xibe people, whereas as they were incorporated into the Banner System, archery became a daily training routine in the military. Archery remained a healthy sport after the fall of the Man ruling. In fact, Xibe traditional archery has become one of China's national intangible cultural heritage items, and has incorporated Xibe features into the sport itself, such as bows and targets with Xibe patterns and cultural elements. Living habits and historical developments have contributed greatly to the inheritance of Xibe sports, which is also a exemplification of the warrior spirit embedded in the Xibe culture.

3.   Significance of Preserving Xibe Culture

Preserving traditional Xibe culture is also a way of preserving the ethnic identity of the members of this minority group. Ethnic identity is a component of a person's social identity which is constructed with one's knowledge about one's own ethnic culture and with one's self-recognition with the ethnic culture [6]. With the widespread of social media and other social platforms, the younger generation of ethnic minority groups come to realize the difference between their own culture and the dominant culture. Scholars have suggested that such encounter with the prevailing culture may push the young generation to emphasize more on their own culture, which in turn calls for the preservation, or even revitalization, of their ethnic culture. The preservation of the Xibe culture, especially under the digital age, therefore, has become a crucial way of constructing and balancing the generation's ethnic culture and their national identity.

Among all factors of any ethnic culture, language is one of the essential components, and is an "important way to link one's cultural past and to protect one's cultural uniqueness in the present" [7]. According to Wu, the core of the Xibe culture lies in its language and other cultural practices [8]. With the rapid development of technology and national economy in China, the Xibe culture and its

language are at the brink of marginalization. Preserving the Xibe language, therefore, plays an urgent and important role in revitalizing the Xibe culture.

Furthermore, Xibe culture is an indispensable part of the Chinese traditional culture. Saving and preserving the Xibe culture is also a way to preserve and further foster the diversity of the Chinese ethnic culture as a whole. On the one hand, it allows both members within the Xibe minority group, especially the younger generation, and members of different ethnicity to better learn the history and inheritance of the Xibe culture. For Xibe people, the preservation will encourage them to be proud of their ethnicity and better cultivate their ethinic identity. For people of other ethnicities, this will also become an opportunity of communicating with another ethnic group, which all the way contributes the diversity and inclusiveness of the Chinese traditional culture.

4. Role of Digital Technology in Cultural Preservation

China has initiated the digitalizing of cultural documents since the 1980s, and has accelerated the pace of digital documentation along side with the development of digital technology. At first, most documents being digitalized are videos and data for storage purposes, but now digital technology has been much more widely used for exhibiting and educational purposes. Xibe literature, including folklore stories and songs are also recorded and digitalized for better protection and inheritance. According to Wu, originally the Xibe traditional tales had been merely written down as record, but as the development of digital technology, these resources are pictured and photographed within its cultural and linguistic context, which provide detailed access for scholars and people who wish to learn about the Xibe culture. As a result of the digital documentation, not only are the invaluable cultural creations preserved, but they can also be distributed more easily. For example, interactive programs are employed in the Chinese Xibe Museum, which provides an impressive and personal Xibe cultural experience for audience and visitors. Cultural text from the Xibe tradition can also be distributed to the learning community within the Xibe ethnicity, potentially starting from the Xibe language. As Grenoble and Whaley claims, the defining sigh of a language being alive is to be spoken by children.

Social media will also facilitate greatly the preservation of the Xibe culture. On the one hand, social media can be used to connect Xibe communities, creating a stronger bond within the ethnic group itself with their shared cultural content. Given the special case of the Xibe, as in it is divided largely into two main inhabitants, namely Xinjiang and Liaoning, building such connection between different groups is also a way to communicate among themselves in terms of any cultural developments, just as the reciprocal contribution into the Xibe music tradition. On the other, using social media is also a way of introducing the Xibe culture to people outside the ethnic groups. For example, subscription articles on WeChat, the mainstream social media in China, from official accounts such as the Chinese Xibe Museum will serve as an educational tool to introduce the Xibe cultural events to audience who are unfamiliar with the culture.

5. Case Studies and Examples

5.1. Case study of successful incorporation of digital technology into the preservation in Fujian Province, China

In recent years, experts and scholars have been recording the process of saving and preserving considerable intangible cultural heritage through videos and digital texts, such as Shoushan stone carvings and Mazu, the regional religion of the Fujian province. Moreover, Wu [8] also observes that Audio resources have been established to record and preserve the local dialect Nanyin and local operas. Such sound data platform is even available on mobile phones. The use of virtual reality, or

VR has also contributed massively to the process, allowing the cultural practices and creations to be distributed and viewed online.

5.2.   Case studies of language revival

In their book *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization (2006),* Grenoble and Whaley proposes two models for language revitalization: full immersion program and half immersion program. These two models differ in that while the former emphasizes a thorough and intense immersion into the cultural and linguistic context, the latter relies on a bilingual system, in which both the dominant language and the revitalizing language is being used. One successful example of the total immersion program was the revival of the Maori language, spoken mainly in New Zealand. The program asked the elderly to come into class and teach the young children how to speak Maori. Grenoble and Whaley conclude that the purpose and the essence of the full immersion program is to start from the younger generation, and gradually form a progressive program that evolves as the generation grows.

What has been employed in the case of Xibe is closer to the second model proposed, where both the revitalizing language and the more common language is taught in school. According to Guan [9], since the young generation of the Xibe minority group who aged under 20 have limited knowledge of their language system, a bilingual school has been established in Xinjiang for Xibe children to be education in both the Xibe language and Mandarin Chinese. However, as Grenoble and Whaley point out, such half immersion program will not be suffice if the goal is a thorough language revitalization as the bilingual system is only adequate in providing basic learning outcomes and its influence is more likely to fade out once the students are exposed to the dominant culture.

6.   Strategies for Effective Cultural Inheritance

6.1.   Collaborative Efforts

Many scholars have agreed that saving and preserving the traditional culture is rather a collaborative effort, which means that the participants not only include the people within the minority group, but also involves regulations and promotions from the government. Currently, the Chinese government has contributed greatly to protecting the Xibe culture by establishing museums in Liaoning Province, where the Xibe people originated and bringing the lives of Xibe people into the public through streaming news. Nonetheless, there is still much more to accomplish in terms of preserving and inheriting the Xibe culture especially in the digital age. For instance, government policies should be published to support appropriate programs of revitalizing Xibe culture. Funding and other financial support should also be provided to sustain cultural preservation initiatives.

6.2.   Innovative Approaches

The rapid development in digital technology has introduced much more options of cultural encounters. Institutions like museums are utilizing virtual reality (VR) and other interactive technology to recreate traditional environments and experiences. Moreover, museums have also given rise to the market of cultural creative products. For instance, according to Sun and Zhou [10], the most popular product in the Chinese Xibo Museum gift shop are the paper-cut bookmarks with Xibe cultural elements. Besides, keychains, puppets and hanging decorations are also among the top choices of visitors. These cultural creative products, as Xu [11] points out, have preserved the cultural creativity embedded in the Xibe culture itself. However, Sun and Zhou also asserts that to appeal to a wider ranger of customers, the cultural elements of the cultural creative products could be further emphasized, along with the economical and aesthetic value of the products.

As aforementioned, bilingual schools have been established for Xibe children to learn their own language. Digital media can also utilized in such educational context. An orthography can be established first and converted to textual date and be distributed to school children. Interactive programs and teaching methods can also be employed to create a more intense linguistic and cultural context for young learners of the Xibe language.

7.   Conclusion

The Xibe people, originating from the northeastern China, carries tremendous cultural values, with their language, religion, sports and other social and cultural practices. The Xibe culture is also crucial to the diversity of the Chinese traditional culture, especially under a time when rapid technological development brings about the clash between the ethnic culture and dominant culture. Different parts of the society should participate in joint effort to preserve and inherit the Xibe culture while making use of the prevalence of technological advances, in order to save the unique Xibe culture from being marginalized and even disappearing.

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