RESEARCH PAPER

Ethnomedicinal Knowledge as Intangible Cultural Heritage: Digital Documentation and Transmission among the Beihai Danjia of Southern China

Zhang Weifeng

[1] Primary Supervisor:Asst. Prof. Dr.Preechawut Apirating

[2] Co-Supervisor：Dr.Pat Kotchapakdee

[3] Co-Supervisor：Dr.Keran Wang

Abstract

The Beihai Danjia, a maritime community in Guangxi, China, have developed a distinctive body of ethnomedicinal knowledge shaped by coastal living, fishing livelihoods, boat-based mobility, and long-term interaction with marine and littoral environments. This knowledge includes the use of local medicinal plants, seafood-derived remedies, herbal baths, ritual healing practices, and everyday health beliefs embedded in family life, Saltwater songs, wedding rituals, festival ceremonies, and communal maritime routines. However, the transition from boat-based settlement to land-based residence, the aging of knowledge holders, the weakening of intergenerational transmission, and the growing influence of tourism commercialization have placed this intangible cultural heritage under increasing pressure. This study examines how Beihai Danjia ethnomedicinal knowledge is produced, transmitted, and reinterpreted in contemporary China, and explores how digital documentation may support its preservation without reducing it to a decontextualized cultural commodity. Employing qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with community elders, inheritors, and local cultural workers, participant observation of 蜑家 rituals and daily practices, and analysis of local intangible cultural heritage records, the study identifies three interrelated issues: the gradual loss of living contexts for medicinal knowledge, the fragmentation of inheritance chains between older and younger generations, and the tension between heritage recognition and market-driven representation. In response, the study proposes a community-centered digital documentation framework, integrating oral-history archives, audio-visual records of medicinal songs and practices, annotated plant and remedy databases, and interactive coastal heritage maps. The research argues that Danjia ethnomedicine should not be treated merely as a collection of folk remedies, but as a living heritage system in which healing practices, maritime identity, and cultural memory are inseparably linked. By connecting ethnopharmacological documentation with intangible heritage protection, this study offers a reference for safeguarding coastal minority knowledge systems through ethically grounded and digitally supported approaches.

Keywords: Beihai Danjia; ethnomedicinal knowledge; intangible cultural heritage; digital documentation; maritime heritage; cultural transmission

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1 Introduction

The Danjia（疍家） people constitute a distinctive water-based ethnic group inhabiting the coastal regions of China's South China Sea. The Beihai Danjia community is primarily distributed across Dijiao,（地角）Qiaogang Town,（桥港镇）Waisha Island, （外沙岛） and the surrounding maritime areas of Beihai City, Guangxi (Zhou, S. L.,& Li, Y. H. (2018). This group possesses a long-standing history and a unique cultural profile. Through their prolonged interaction with the marine environment, they have developed a cultural system encompassing Saltwater songs,（咸水歌）Danjia houseboats, and maritime folk customs, which holds considerable significance in the fields of anthropology and cultural studies.

Since the advent of the 21st century, China's accelerated urbanization processes and economic restructuring have exerted profound and complex impacts on traditional community cultures. As a significant coastal open city, Beihai has experienced rapid tourism growth, sustained industrial development, and increasingly frequent population mobility, all of which collectively constitute the external driving forces transforming the living environment and lifestyle of the Danjia people (Wu, X. M., 2014). Concurrently, the younger generation of Danjia people has progressively integrated into land-based life, with out-migration for employment becoming a prevalent choice, resulting in notable shifts in cultural identity and inheritance models, accompanied by a multiplicity of emergent challenges.

Firstly, the contraction of traditional living spaces exemplified by the transformation of fishing village layouts and the diminished utilization of wooden fishing vessels has progressively weakened the "survival context" upon which cultural practices depend（Huang, J., Liang, L.& Geng, Y. (2018). Secondly, a discernible intergenerational rupture has emerged: the aging of elder inheritors coincides with the diminished willingness of younger generations to acquire traditional skills, driven by economic pressures and the allure of modern culture. Thirdly, the commercialization of tourism has led to the simplification or even distortion of certain cultural elements to cater to tourist preferences, thereby threatening cultural authenticity（Wu, Y., Ma, S. W., Li, N.,& Liao, L. H. (2013).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, under the dual impetus of cultural protection policies and market forces, Danjia culture has manifested a certain degree of revival. However, its core driving forces derive primarily from policy support, tourism industry development, and the awakening of ethnic identity consciousness. In response, the Beihai municipal government, in conjunction with Danjia descendants, has formulated a series of protection policies targeting intangible cultural heritage and regionally distinctive cultures (including Danjia culture) within the local social context and policy orientation. These policies have incorporated Danjia culture into the key protection category, providing multi-level support ranging from financial subsidies to talent cultivation for the inheritance of Danjia culture (Chen, L. X., 2020).

According to the core proposition of Aleida Assmann, a prominent contributor to cultural memory theory that the dynamism of memory is intrinsically related to the "memory crisis" and "memory reconstruction" characteristic of contemporary expanded modern societies (Assmann, 2011), the developmental trajectory of Beihai Danjia culture aptly demonstrates the fundamental assertion that cultural memory relies on carriers for transmission and evolves dynamically in response to environmental change. In its early period, the Danjia

community constructed a cultural memory system rooted in maritime life and ethnic identity, utilizing settlement areas such as Dijiao and Qiaogang Town, along with houseboats, as material spaces, and Saltwater songs and maritime folk customs as non-material practices. However, since the 21st century, urbanization has led to the atrophy of traditional spaces and the rupture of intergenerational transmission chains, while tourism commercialization has further distorted the authentic features of cultural memory. These factors have collectively eroded the memory carriers and transmission chains, precipitating Danjia culture into a state of memory crisis. The Beihai municipal government has subsequently listed Danjia culture in the key protection catalog of intangible cultural heritage, providing financial and talent support. The Danjia community has also actively engaged in revitalizing carriers and reconstructing transmission chains to awaken identity recognition, thereby facilitating the transition of Danjia cultural memory from crisis toward reconstruction. This process further indicates that the dynamic inheritance of cultural memory requires both external policy guarantees and internal community practices, achieving its continuity through sustained interaction with the real environment.

2 Research Objectives

1:To examine the primary dilemmas confronting the cultural inheritance of the Beihai Danjia community in the new century.
2:To explore the innovative practical pathways developed in response to these dilemmas.

3 Research Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research methodology.
The research employs interviews and observation as its primary research instruments. A total of five individuals were interviewed, including Yuan Xuewu （袁学武）(inheritor of the Danjia Waisha Longmu Temple Fair), Shen Hongjie（沈鸿杰） (inheritor of Beihai Danjia Saltwater Songs), Zhong Qi（钟琪）(staff member of the Beihai Housing Provident Fund Management Department), Xu Hengyan（许恒燕） (staff member of the Beihai Municipal Committee of the China Democratic League), and Liu Pengliang（刘鹏亮）(a university faculty member working in Beihai). The interview content concentrated on the challenges encountered in the development of Beihai Danjia culture since 2000, as well as the various measures adopted to promote its development.
The research interviews are structured within the analytical framework of cultural memory theory, drawing upon Aleida Assmann's conceptualization that cultural memory requires transmission through material and non-material carriers (Such as Saltwater songs and wedding customs), and that its transmission status is closely linked to memory crisis and memory reconstruction.
Through in-depth interviews with inheritors of Danjia culture and relevant practitioners who have contributed to its inheritance, this study investigates the dilemmas and challenges faced in the transmission of specific cultural elements, including Danjia Saltwater songs, Danjia wedding customs, and Danjia costumes. The objective is to systematically delineate the practical problems in Danjia cultural inheritance, and in conjunction with the core tenets of Participatory Culture Theory and Living Heritage Theory, to explore appropriate innovative development pathways.

4 Research result

4.1 Practical Dilemmas in Beihai Danjia Cultural Inheritance

Through in-depth interviews with Danjia cultural inheritors (such as Yuan Xuewu) and relevant practitioners, complemented by field observations, this research identifies three core dilemmas confronting Danjia cultural inheritance, specifically: the dissolution of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers, intergenerational inheritance rupture combined with inheritor aging, and the impact of tourism commercialization on cultural authenticity.

4.1.1 Dissolution of Traditional Living Spaces and Cultural Carriers

Since the 21st century, with the continued deepening of urbanization and the modernization of fishing production methods, the traditional living spaces of Beihai Danjia people have progressively contracted. Areas such as Waisha Island and Qiaogang Town have experienced radical transformation of their original settlement patterns due to urban tourism development. Qiaogang Town, in particular, has developed into a well-known tourist destination featuring Danjia cuisine and handicrafts.



(Waisha Old Street in Beihai City—Photographed Image)

(Image Source: Online photographic images)

Most of the dwellings once inhabited by Danjia families have been demolished and rebuilt. The number of traditional wooden Danjia fishing vessels has declined significantly, and the frequency of their use in fishing production has also decreased substantially（Huang, J., Liang, L., & Geng, Y. (2018). The contemporary social living space of Danjia culture in the Beibu Gulf. Journal of Guangxi Institute of Socialism, (06), 93-98.）

From the perspective of Aleida Assmann's cultural memory theory, the transmission of Danjia cultural memory is highly dependent on the synergistic functioning of material and non-material carriers. However, the disappearance of the aforementioned traditional living spaces and production tools directly endangers the survival of these carriers. The cultural carriers intimately associated with water-based life have consequently disintegrated: the spaces within houseboats that carried memory, such as areas for displaying fishing implements have gradually vanished; with the widespread application of mechanized fishing equipment, traditional skills such as net-weaving and boat-building have lost their everyday practical contexts; and changes in lifestyle have rendered the spontaneous singing of Saltwater songs increasingly difficult to reproduce, with such scenes now observable only during major festivals and official events. This rupture of carriers precisely substantiates the theoretical proposition that "carrier absence readily induces cultural memory crisis," ultimately resulting in the severe degradation of the "survival foundation" upon which Danjia cultural practices depend.

4.1.2 Intergenerational Inheritance Rupture and Inheritor Aging

Among the elderly population in Beihai's Danjia settlement areas, those possessing comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of Danjia culture have become few in number. Taking Saltwater songs as an example, individuals capable of complete performance and familiarity with the entire ceremonial process of traditional Danjia water weddings are now extremely scarce, while young people possessing comparable abilities are even rarer (Wu, L.2018). According to information disclosed by Shen Hongjie, the inheritor of Saltwater songs, during the interview, no suitable successor for Saltwater songs has yet been identified, a situation consistent with Aleida Assmann's cultural memory theory assertion that "the inheritor constitutes the core carrier of intergenerational cultural memory transmission. The absence of successors directly threatens the continuity of the memory chain. The younger generation of Danjia villages predominantly chooses land-based employment or out-migration for work, with the dual pressures of economic constraints and modern cultural trends significantly diminishing their interest and willingness to learn traditional skills. Currently, the registered Danjia cultural inheritors in Beihai City are generally advanced in age, and the phenomenon of "failure to find successors" is notably pronounced. The number of inheritors for projects such as Saltwater songs and Danjia costumes has become extremely limited, all of whom are elderly, and the intergenerational knowledge transmission chain is on the verge of rupture.

4.1.3 Impact of Tourism Commercialization on Cultural Authenticity

With the rapid expansion of Beihai's tourism industry, certain elements of Danjia culture have been simplified, adapted, or even reconstructed to accommodate tourist preferences. For instance, the traditional Danjia sea-opening ceremony has evolved into an annual large-scale event organized by specialized institutions, with numerous performative programs added.

(Danjia opening of the sea ceremony in Beihai)

(Image Source: Online photography images)

Saltwater songs have been adapted into rhythmically lively popular-style melodies (Chen, L. X., 2020). Furthermore, contemporary Danjia descendants generally choose to conduct their wedding ceremonies on land, incorporating local land-based wedding customs. Under the influence of commercial forces, the expressive forms of culture have gradually deviated from their original manifestations, posing a serious challenge to cultural authenticity.

4.2 Innovative Practices in Beihai Danjia Cultural Inheritance

In response to the practical problems in Danjia cultural inheritance, relevant practices primarily revolve around three core issues: carrier dissolution, generational gaps combined with inheritor aging, and the impact of tourism commercialization. The proposed innovative measures include: based on Living Heritage Theory, transforming fishing vessels into "mobile workshops" and repurposing idle houseboats into "craftsman sharing spaces" to revitalize carrier functions; drawing upon Participatory Culture Theory, employing intergenerational collaboration mechanisms to document tacit knowledge and incentivize younger generations' active participation in cultural dissemination; and similarly grounded in this theoretical framework, establishing a dual-layered experiential model of "light observation and deep participation" to balance cultural authenticity with community rights,

thereby injecting sustained vitality into cultural inheritance.

4.2.1 Addressing the Dissolution of Traditional Living Spaces and Cultural Carriers

The core tenet of Living Heritage Theory posits that the vitality of culture is rooted in ongoing practice rather than static preservation. It emphasizes that culture should rely on specific production and living contexts, be transmitted through continuous use and practice, and opposes the isolation of cultural carriers as museumized exhibits.

To address the issue of traditional Danjia houseboats and other carriers transitioning from "utilitarian implements" to "static exhibits," 2-3 well-preserved traditional Danjia wooden fishing vessels are selected for upgrading into "Danjia Cultural Mobile Workshops." The hulls retain the basic framework of their original fishing functions while being supplemented with simple workstations and compact audio equipment (for improvised Saltwater song performances). Regular "workshop sea-outing experiential activities" are organized, departing from the dock to carry tourists or primary and secondary school students to participate in practical activities such as inshore fishing, shallow-water shellfish collecting, and net casting. During the activities, inheritors simultaneously provide commentary on Danjia lifestyles aboard vessels and related ritual culture. On the return journey, participants are taught to sing fragments of Saltwater songs. This carrier and practice model transforms Danjia houseboats from static exhibits into operable cultural teaching spaces, re-establishing the organic connection between material carriers and intangible skills (fishing, Saltwater songs) within authentic scenarios. Secondly, idle traditional houseboats are repurposed into Danjia living skills sharing spaces, equipped with tactile fishing net raw materials and repair tools. Inheritors are regularly invited to reside, enabling residents to bring old fishing nets for learning repair techniques, while tourists may also participate in the experience and take finished products away. Books and reproduced old photographs related to Danjia culture are also provided for reading and exchange. This transforms houseboats into public cultural spaces for "resident daily skill exchange and tourist experience," re-embedding traditional carriers into contemporary community life.

4.2.2 Addressing Intergenerational Inheritance Rupture and Inheritor Aging

Participatory Culture Theory was proposed by American media scholar Henry Jenkins in 1992. Jenkins emphasizes that participatory culture does not require every member of a community to engage in content creation, but rather that the entire cultural ecosystem encourages and supports such participation. In such a culture, ordinary users are no longer merely passive recipients of media content but become active participants capable of creating, sharing, modifying, and disseminating content.

In response to the circumstances of elderly Danjia inheritors, young assistants are assigned to help document tacit knowledge that may be lost due to aging (such as Saltwater song improvisation techniques and fishing vessel repair know-how), addressing the challenges of recording and preserving such information. Concurrently, young people are organized to participate in knowledge exploration as researchers and collaborators, stimulating their active participation awareness and transforming the younger generation from passive learners into active knowledge documenters. The outcomes of this exploration are not limited to written manuals but may be recorded as videos or illustrated comic-style handbooks. After review by the inheritors, these materials may be disseminated through

official accounts and social media platforms, enabling young people to naturally internalize cultural connotations through the process of"recording, transformation, and dissemination" This approach simultaneously assists inheritors in making tacit knowledge explicit, preventing its loss due to aging.

4.2.3 Addressing the Impact of Tourism Commercialization on Cultural Authenticity

The core insight of Participatory Culture Theory lies in transcending the traditional paradigm of "cultural producers' one-way output and audiences' passive consumption," emphasizing that the vitality of culture derives from the active participation and co-creation of multiple stakeholders.

Families that maintain traditional production and living habits, such as those engaged in inshore fishing and possessing traditional net-weaving skills, are independently selected by the Danjia community. Based on authentic Danjia production and living scenarios, an open cultural experience is created, with light and deep experiential modes established to accommodate the needs of different groups. The light mode is open to a broad range of tourists: Danjia community members naturally engage in daily tasks such as repairing fishing nets and processing catches (such as drying fish, peeling shrimp shells) in their own courtyards or at the dock. During these activities, they hum Saltwater songs (not as deliberate performances), and tourists may observe and photograph in designated areas. Family hosts share information informally, combining commentary with everyday life content, for example: "This Saltwater song is an old tune my mother taught me," reflecting authentic life details. The government provides monthly family participation subsidies to alleviate economic burdens. For tourists who stay longer, a deep participation mode is offered: tourists may assist in a family's daily activities, accompanying them for sea fishing, jointly drying catches, or helping prepare Danjia dinners in the evening. The family's authentic work routines are not disrupted during this process. After the experience, tourists may voluntarily pay for ingredient costs, all of which go to the family. Simultaneously, scene interpretation cards are provided as supplementary aids to guide tourists' understanding of authentic cultural connotations. Simple interpretive cards are placed around the open scenarios, focusing on "the connection between culture and life" rather than performative introductions, helping tourists understand that culture is not a staged presentation but a natural expression of life.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

5.1.1 Conclusions Regarding Dilemmas

Through qualitative research methods, this study confirms that against the macro-background of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and digitalization, Beihai Danjia culture confronts three core dilemmas: the progressive dissolution of traditional living spaces and cultural carriers, intergenerational inheritance rupture and inheritor aging, and the erosion of cultural authenticity by tourism commercialization. These three dilemmas collectively constitute a systemic "survival foundation" crisis, subjecting the sustainable inheritance of Danjia culture to severe tests.

5.1.2 Conclusions Regarding Innovations

In addressing the three core dilemmas in Beihai Danjia cultural inheritance"dissolution of traditional living spaces and carriers," "intergenerational inheritance rupture and inheritor aging," and "the impact of tourism commercialization on authenticity" this study proposes corresponding theoretically-grounded strategies: based on Living Heritage Theory, transforming traditional wooden fishing

vessels into "mobile workshops" and repurposing idle houseboats into skills sharing spaces, utilizing the "carrier and practice" model to achieve the revitalization of cultural carriers; drawing upon Participatory Culture Theory (as articulated by Henry Jenkins), assigning young assistants to elder inheritors to participate in the exploration and dissemination of tacit knowledge as "researchers and collaborators," thereby addressing the intergenerational inheritance dilemma; and similarly grounded in Participatory Culture Theory, having the Danjia community independently select families to establish a light observation and deep participation layered experiential model, supplemented with scene interpretation cards to guide understanding of cultural authenticity. Through the coordinated operation of these multiple strategies, the living inheritance of Danjia culture is promoted.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 Systematic Analysis of the Genesis of Dilemmas

The inheritance dilemmas encountered by Beihai Danjia culture in the contemporary era do not constitute a simple aggregation of isolated problems, but rather represent an internally interconnected and continuously evolving systemic crisis. From the perspective of cultural memory theory, the essence of the Danjia cultural crisis can be understood as a structural dysfunction of the cultural memory system.

Specifically, the urbanization process and the modernization of fishing production methods have directly eroded the physical spaces and production bases upon which cultural memory relies. The dissolution of traditional Danjia settlements and the decline in wooden fishing vessel utilization have deprived cultural memory of its sustaining material anchors, these spaces were not merely sites of daily life but also the contextual foundations for cultural practices such as sea song transmission and skill instruction. The disappearance of these spaces signifies that cultural practices have lost their natural "performance venue."

Concurrently, the rupture of intergenerational inheritance and the aging of inheritors have severed the interpersonal transmission channel of cultural memory. Danjia culture depends to a considerable extent on oral and heart-to-heart intergenerational transmission, making it a representative case of "interpersonal memory." The passing of elder inheritors implies not only the loss of individuals but also the irreversible disappearance of the living knowledge they carried. The younger generation, constrained by economic pressures and cultural estrangement, lacks both the willingness and capacity to continue this transmission, further narrowing this transfer channel.

The intervention of tourism commercialization constitutes yet another form of challenge. Commercialization tends to extract cultural elements from their original contexts, simplifying and adapting them into rapidly consumable cultural commodities. While this process has, to a certain extent, enhanced cultural visibility, it has simultaneously led to the disconnection between cultural symbols and their original meanings rituals are staged, songs are popularized, and the historical depth and ethnic identity connotations of cultural memory are progressively diluted within the logic of commodification.

It is noteworthy that these three dilemmas exhibit mutually reinforcing relationships: the dissolution of carriers accelerates the rupture of intergenerational transmission, while the rupture of transmission renders the community insufficiently capable of cultural interpretation and discursive agency in the face of commercialization pressures, further exacerbating the loss of cultural authenticity. Together, these three factors constitute a

"reinforcing loop of cultural memory decline," subjecting Danjia cultural inheritance to systemic challenges.

5.2.2 Theoretical Logic and Practical Limitations of Innovative Practices

The three innovative strategies proposed in response to the aforementioned dilemmas possess clear theoretical foundations and maintain substantial consistency with the theoretical frameworks from which they are derived.

In addressing carrier dissolution, Living Heritage Theory emphasizes that "cultural survival depends on sustained practice." Accordingly, the strategy transforms traditional fishing vessels and idle houseboats from "objects to be viewed" into "participatory spaces" fishing vessels become instructional platforms for sea practice, and houseboats become community-based skill exchange venues. This transformation enables material carriers to regain connection with daily life, rather than being isolated behind museum glass display cases.

In addressing intergenerational rupture, Participatory Culture Theory provides a conceptual framework for redefining the role of younger generations. Young people are no longer positioned as passive cultural recipients but are invited to become active producers of cultural content :documenting, transforming, and disseminating the tacit knowledge of elder inheritors. The significance of this role transformation lies in the fact that participation itself constitutes a form of deep cultural learning; young people naturally achieve understanding and internalization of cultural connotations through the process of "doing," thereby alleviating, to a certain extent, the separation of "teaching" and "learning" inherent in traditional master-apprentice systems.

In addressing the impact of commercialization, another important insight from Participatory Culture Theory concerns the rebalancing of cultural production and consumption relationships. The family-based layered experiential model transforms tourists from "audience of standardized performances" into "participants in daily life." Cultural presentation is no longer a carefully choreographed stage performance but the natural labor and social interaction occurring in daily life. The design of scene interpretation cards further guides tourists to establish a cognitive framework of "culture as life," thereby resisting, to a certain degree, the loss of meaning induced by excessive commercialization.

However, the effectiveness of these innovative strategies is subject to certain practical constraints. Firstly, the sustained operation of "mobile workshops" and "houseboat sharing spaces" depends on stable funding support and organizational guarantees, currently relying primarily on government subsidies and project-based initiatives without having developed sustainable endogenous economic models. Secondly, while the participation of young assistants has demonstrated notable effectiveness in pilot phases, whether comparable levels of engagement and cultural identification can be maintained in broader implementation remains to be further observed. Thirdly, the family experience model requires careful balancing of selection criteria, willingness to participate, and actual benefits for participating families; improper handling may generate new internal conflicts or induce new tendencies toward performative presentation.

Overall, the core value of these three innovative practices lies in promoting the transformation of Danjia cultural inheritance from passive protection toward active revitalization, providing a useful reference for the inheritance of similar intangible cultural heritage rooted in production and daily life

contexts. The key insight is that intangible cultural heritage protection should respect the subject position of cultural holders, re-embed culture in authentic life contexts, while simultaneously accommodating the differentiated needs of diverse participant groups. Only through the continuous interaction of theoretical guidance and practical adaptation can true "living inheritance" be achieved, rather than solidifying culture as a "living fossil" for contemplation.

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