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Cultural Genes and Community-Building: A Study on the Renewal Path of Baishi Village in Zhaoqing

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Abstract: Community-building serves as a vital path to activate endogenous community dynamics and reshape cultural identity. Taking Baishi Village in Zhaoqing as a case study, this paper adopts community-building as its theoretical perspective and oral history as its research method to investigate the dilemmas of cultural inheritance and community identity confronting this Duan inkstone cultural village. The study identifies existing problems in Baishi Village, including intergenerational rupture, the objectification of Duan inkstone culture, family-based inheritance, and fragmented collective memory. Based on oral historical materials, this paper proposes a renewal path of "cultural excavation — symbol condensation — spatial empowerment." That is, reconstruct community narratives through oral history, forge community symbols via full-process craftsmanship, and promote community governance and identity reconstruction relying on public spaces such as the village history museum. This path facilitates the living inheritance of Duan inkstone intangible cultural heritage and can provide references for similar traditional-craft villages.

Keywords: Cultural Genes; Community-Building; Oral History; Baishi Village; Duan Inkstone

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1. Introduction

Urban-rural communities constitute the basic units for collective living and historical-cultural inheritance. With the in-depth advancement of modernization and urbanization, "village-to-community-conversion" communities are generally faced with the rupture of historical cultural context and the weakening of community consciousness. In 2025, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued Opinions on Continuously Advancing Urban Renewal Initiatives, emphasizing "continuing cultural context and improving quality," which highlights the strategic significance of sustaining community history and culture [1].

This paper selects Baishi Village of Xia Huanggang No.1 Community in Duanzhou District, Zhaoqing City, Guangdong Province as its research subject. Known as "No. 1 Village of Duan Inkstone," this village

boasts a profound heritage of Duan inkstone-making craftsmanship and represents a typical case of a traditional-craft village transforming into a modern community. On the basis of field investigations and oral-history interviews, the research team interviewed community residents, Duan inkstone inheritors and village-cadre members, sorted out Duan inkstone craftsmanship and village history, and strove to discover folk customs, local conditions and indigenous knowledge embedded in collective memory. From the perspective of community-building, this paper further discusses the identification of Baishi Village's cultural genes and its renewal paths.

2. Practical dilemmas and theoretical responses from the community-building perspective

As "No. 1 Village of Duan Inkstone," Baishi Village carries profound cultural traditions amid modern transformation, yet it also faces dual pressures of cultural inheritance and community identity. This section first sorts out its practical dilemmas and then delivers theoretical responses from the community-building perspective.

2.1. Practical dilemmas

First, alienated villager ties and weakened community identity. The permanent-resident population of Baishi Village shows an ageing tendency. Most young generations leave the village for further education or employment, resulting in declining vitality of public life. Incoming inkstone carvers have not yet formed in-depth social connections with local residents. Interviews indicate that young generations lack in-depth identification with village history, collective memory, and public affairs. A sense of "identity alienation" rooted in geographical ties and industrial traditions emerges, threatening the continuity of community social capital and cultural inheritance.

Second, the objectification of Duan inkstone cultural heritage and family-based barriers. On the one hand, cultural cognition tends toward objectification. Most master-craftsmen of Duan inkstone emphasize its artistic and economic value, yet neglect the full workflow, including stone quarrying, material processing, carving, polishing, and box-fitting, as well as their cultural connotations. External communication also focuses on the collectible attributes of inkstones rather than the integrity of living-state culture. Such cognition of "valuing finished products over processes" severs the practical context of Duan inkstone craftsmanship, turning it from collectively shared craftsmanship into individual-oriented and family-oriented "object" production and weakening its symbolic function of consolidating community identity. On the other hand, craftsmanship inheritance is subject to family-based barriers. Represented by four major clans, namely the Cai, Cheng, Luo, and Guo families, inheritance is mostly organized within families, and barriers exist among workshops, restricting intra-village communication and collaboration.

Third, vague historical narratives and fragmented collective memory. Villagers' oral-historical accounts concerning the Baishi Duan inkstone Factory, craftsmen's stories, and village changes remain scattered and individual-oriented without systematic collation. Effective links among historical events, figure legends, and spatial transformations are absent to support identification with the community's cultural-identity symbols. A sense of alienation exists between grand narratives of Duan inkstone culture and villagers' individual-life experiences.

2.2. Theoretical response: Community-building perspective

Community-building originated from international community-development movements in the mid-20th century and has been gradually refined through practices in Japan, the Taiwan region, and other regions [2]. It stresses residents' voluntary participation, joint construction of infrastructure and cultural-value systems on the basis of cooperation and communication, and planning according to local natural and human resources as well as historical context, so as to rebuild sustainable natural environments, cultural traditions and social structures [3]. Within such a process, cultural collation, spatial revitalization and institutional innovation interact with one another. Residents are no longer mere managed objects but gradually become subjects of governance.

For Baishi Village, community-building can exert effects mainly in three respects. First, tap intergenerational collective memory, relying on indigenous knowledge and cultural genes, to form relatively coherent community narratives. Second, establish cross-family and cross-generation collaboration modes so that craftsmanship inheritance breaks out of the confinement of families and workshops and moves toward open-ended exchanges. Third, revitalize place-based resources in the village via spatial interventions and strengthen the functions of carriers for collective memory and social platforms. Attaching importance to the accumulation of social capital and the cultivation of cultural identity, community-building fits traditional villages such as Baishi Village, which boast rich intangible cultural heritage deposits yet suffer impacts from modernization.

3. Causes of dilemmas reflected in oral history materials

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, drawing upon oral-history interview records, this section dissects the causes behind Baishi Village's cultural dilemmas from three dimensions: intergenerational identity, craftsmanship inheritance, and collective memory, providing empirical foundations for subsequent path construction.

3.1. Intergenerational rupture: Historical root of weakened identity

Intergenerational rupture manifests as marked divergences in values, cultural identity, and practical patterns among different generations. Such divergences relate to failure of collective-memory transmission mechanisms and blocked socialization processes. The older generation in Baishi Village forged the identity of "inkstone-village dwellers" through collective labor, communal life, and ritual practices. Nevertheless, under the influences of economic-system transformation, individualized production modes and shifting external cultures, younger generations can hardly internalize original cultural symbols. Oral materials show that the Baishi Duan inkstone Factory in the collectivization era once fostered strong intergenerational collaboration and identity awareness:

Q: Could you tell us what the Baishi Duan inkstone Factory was like in those days?

A: Back then, we had the Baishi Duan inkstone Factory. We belonged to the production brigade. Ours was the Baishi Village production brigade. Our performance stood out. In those days, one work point could yield as much as 2.1 mao, while other villages only got a few jiao. Later, the people's commune took over our village factory. There was no private-owned economy in the old days. The private economy emerged after the reform and opening-up in the 1970s. After China's reform and opening-up, Duan inkstone production could be run privately, whereas everything had been collectively operated before.

This account reproduces collective labor and unified distribution in the collective-economy era and reflects high consistency among generations in work ethics, self-identity and community belonging. The older generation formed the communal identity of "inkstone village dwellers" via collective-labor forms such as "production-brigade" and "work-point recording."

Nevertheless, along with economic transformation and individualized production, younger generations' growth trajectories have changed. The interview contact person remarked:

Q: What jobs do they usually take up after leaving home? Are those jobs still related to Duan inkstone?

A1: They take up other kinds of work.

A2: Especially after the year 2000, living conditions improved. Many young people went away for schooling. Once they reached their twenties, they felt disconnected from traditional crafts. By the time they wanted to learn the craft, a rupture had already occurred. Quite a number of them went to university elsewhere; some got local jobs. If they came back at that age to take up this craft, things would become very difficult. You know, apprenticeship requires eight to ten years of training, during which you cannot generate economic returns or earn a living. Things are slightly better for those from well-off families. Otherwise, after returning home, people face heavy living pressure. When one gets to that age burdened with various pressures, it is hard to settle down and focus on learning the craft. People of our generation mostly started learning at twelve or thirteen years old; only then could we master the craft relatively well. Furthermore, business conditions have been harsh in recent years. Graduates returning home are even more reluctant to engage in this trade. Hence, such an intergenerational rupture exists. (Response 2 is from the interview contact person.)

This demonstrates that expanded educational pathways, diversified occupations, insufficient economic returns, and living stress jointly weaken young generations' emotional investment and cultural identification with Duan inkstone craftsmanship. While the older generation regards Duan inkstone craft as collective identity and life value, younger generations tend to treat it merely as an optional occupation or family heritage. Intergenerational cognitive gaps aggravate identity estrangement.

3.2. Objectification tendency: Cognitive deviation in craftsmanship inheritance

Objectification means that in cultural inheritance, intangible cultural heritage rich in social connotations, collective memory, and living-state practices is simplified into tradable, collectible, and exhibit-able material products, while craftsmanship systems, bodily experiences, and cultural integrity are neglected. In Baishi Village, Duan inkstone inheritance has increasingly focused on the artistic and economic value of finished inkstones, whereas the complete production workflow and indigenous knowledge are marginalized.

An interview with Elder L, a Duan inkstone master, illustrates the contrast between traditional full-process craftsmanship and the current carving-oriented cognition:

Q: How were the Duan inkstone factories operated back then? How was labor divided?

A: Factory operations included sending workers uphill to quarry stones; transporting stones back to the factory; material processing conducted by specialized crews. After material processing, stones were smoothed for another group of workers. Once stone textures were exposed, blanks were manufactured and passed on to other craftsmen. Carving came as the final procedure. Yet before learning inkstone-making, just like learning martial arts, you have to go through preliminary steps … In the old days, before learning inkstone-making, we had to learn bellows-operating and blacksmithing. … You cannot make Duan inkstone without mastering

blacksmithing because you need tools. Therefore, no one was allowed to learn inkstone-making without first learning blacksmithing.

This indicates that Duan inkstone craftsmanship is not confined to carving alone. Instead, it constitutes a complete practical system covering tool-making, stone-material processing, and carving-forming. It represents "embodied practice" deeply rooted in bodily memory and daily labor, embedded in work ethics and community-collaboration networks.

As market-economy forces deepen, the economic attributes of Duan inkstone become prominent and cultural cognition leans toward "products." Narratives regarding sales confirm such tendency:

Q: Back then, did you mostly sell goods to local shops or export them abroad?

A: Private-output volumes were too small for export. … After 1983, private production increased slightly. Export-trading companies brought clients to select goods here. Products were packed and delivered to export-trading companies for them to handle export formalities.

Under market-oriented transformation, economic value gains growing emphasis in Duan inkstone production, while cultural significance and social memory carried by full-process traditional craftsmanship recede to secondary positions. Accordingly, Duan inkstone culture has gradually contracted from holistic "embodied practice" toward object-centered production activities.

Craftsmanship inheritance still operates on a family basis. One inkstone craftsman stated in the interview:

Q: Uncle, did you start learning inkstone-making after finishing school, or at what age?

A: Inkstone-making. My father used to make Duan inkstones, and so did my grandfather. It has been handed down within the family. I started in the 1970s when I was a teenager. Up till now, more than fifty years have passed, over forty-odd years to be exact.

The term "handed down within the family" reveals inheritance's closed-yet-stable features. Although it guarantees continuation of core craftsmanship, it weakens Duan inkstone craft's attribute as a village-level public cultural asset and restricts cross-clan, cross-workshop exchanges and collective innovation.

3.3. Memory fragmentation: Absence of narrative integration mechanisms

Villagers in Baishi Village possess abundant oral recollections of Duan inkstone craftsmanship, village transformations, and collective life events. Nevertheless, such memories remain highly fragmented and individual-oriented and have not evolved into consensus-based historical narratives at the village level. Traces of the former Baishi Duan inkstone Factory constitute a typical example.

Master L (elder) highlights the factory's organizational form as a collective-production space and its role in shaping collective identity:

Q: We would like to hear your personal stories and your family's stories.

A: Duan inkstone-making has a history of more than one thousand years … Production of Duan inkstones had already started in Baishi Village by the late 1960s and early 1970s. Back then, inkstones were mainly for export via the Zhaoqing Foreign-Trade Bureau and the Guangdong Foreign-Trade Bureau to destinations including Japan. It was operated as a sideline industry within our village, and Baishi Village pioneered such development of Duan inkstone craft. … In the 1970s, as efforts were made to expand the Duan inkstone industry, the factory was built.

In contrast, Master L (uncle) recalls from the perspective of operational-model shifts:

Q: When was this factory put into operation and when did it close? Or did it run continuously?

A: Oh, that factory has a long history. The Baishi Duan inkstone Factory was founded right after the liberation. It was established by our village. Around 1989, the contract responsibility system was implemented, and workshops were contracted out. We ran contracts for three years. In the years before 1989, we received numerous foreign trade orders.

The two accounts interpret the same historical site from perspectives of collective production traditions and operational-model transitions, respectively, exhibiting divergences in narrative focus, time frame, and emotional orientation. While this demonstrates richness of individual memory, it also reveals the absence of consensus-based narratives and collective interpretive frameworks at the village level. Without effective integration mechanisms, such scattered fragments can hardly converge into socially cohesive historical heritage.

4. Construction of renewal paths from the community-building perspective

In response to the above-mentioned dilemmas, this paper constructs the renewal path of "cultural excavation — symbol condensation — spatial empowerment" from three dimensions: cultural excavation, consensus-building, and spatial empowerment.

4.1. Excavate cultural genes and reconstruct community narratives

Oral history is not merely a research method, but also a cultural practice that endows communities with subjectivity. It transforms fragmented, implicit indigenous knowledge into structured, explicit cultural resources and enables the reconstruction of collective memory and the identification of cultural genes [4]. Wang Mingke points out that oral history represents manifestations of social memory and reflects transformations of ethnic-group identity and cultural continuity [5]. According to Zhou Xiaohong, through the so-called "social-construction" process proposed by Halbwachs, oral history stands as the most important representational form of collective memory [6]. Baishi Village may adopt oral-history approaches to delve into craftsmen's craftsmanship inheritance, life courses, and village transformations and extract its distinctive Duan inkstone cultural genes — unique cultural markers formed over long-term community development, embedding history, values, and lifestyles.

Specifically, thematic interviews, community workshops, and public exhibitions can be adopted to integrate scattered personal recollections into community stories with internal logic and emotional resonance. For instance, thematic frameworks such as "craftsmen's life histories," "craftsmanship-inheritance genealogies" and "village transformation maps" can be constructed to compile village history archives and cultural-gene atlases supplemented by audio-visual materials, physical-object evidence and digital-media resources. In this way, villagers shift from passive recipients of history toward active narrators and participants in cultural practices. Oral history breaks the monopoly of authoritative traditional historical writing, enabling ordinary villagers, craftsmen, elders, and youth to become history-tellers, facilitating intergenerational dialogue and bridging identity-related ruptures.

4.2. Condense craft-based consensus and jointly build community symbols

Community culture serves as the spiritual bond uniting residents' sentiments and value-identification. Community-building aims to identify distinctive, emotionally resonant "community cultural symbols"

derived from residents' shared historical memory and cultural practices rather than externally imposed ones.

To counter objectification tendencies and family-based barriers, improvements shall be advanced on both cognitive and practical levels. Cognitively, education, publicity, and experiential activities shall help villagers and craftsmen break the fixed mindset of "valuing finished products over processes," so as to achieve comprehensive understanding of full-process Duan inkstone-making craftsmanship as well as relevant ethics, aesthetics, and social relations. Practically, inheritance modes shall be transformed and cross-family, cross-workshop collaboration networks shall be established.

Oral-historical materials show that Duan inkstone-making consists of interconnected procedures: stone quarrying, material processing, blank-making, carving, polishing, and box-fitting. The key to countering objectification lies in shifting exclusive focus from finished-product economic value and carving craftsmanship toward excavation and representation of full-process cultural meanings. Systematic documentation of technical details, specialized tools, usage contexts, relevant rituals, and oral customs for each procedure shall be carried out to build a complete and vivid community craftsmanship-symbol system.

Meanwhile, Duan inkstone inheritance shall shift from intra-family transmission toward community-oriented joint cultivation. Baishi Village may build cross-family community craftsmen collaborative workshops, launch public education programs, and organize open seminars and craftsmanship-exchange events to eliminate barriers among blood-related clans and workshops. Centering on Duan inkstone culture, cultural festivals, craft exhibitions, and tourism-promotion activities can be jointly held with neighboring communities such as Xia Huanggang Community to expand Baishi Village's cultural influence on a broader scale.

4.3. Spatial empowerment: Village history museum as a community governance platform

Public spaces are venues for community living and social interaction. At present, most community-space functions are limited to superficial purposes such as recreation, entertainment, or administrative services and cannot carry historical connotations and in-depth interactions. Although the China Duan Inkstone Exhibition Hall systematically displays Duan inkstone history, craftsmanship, and intangible cultural heritage protection, it predominantly treats Duan inkstone as cultural artefacts. It lacks narratives about Baishi-Village-specific stories, villagers' life memories and subjective values, and fails to achieve good integration with everyday life experiences.

As a new spatial form advocated in community-building, the village history museum responds to Henri Lefebvre's theory of "the production of space" [7]. It can bear cultural, social and economic values and fulfil functions including inheriting village history, transforming exhibition modes, expanding villager-to-villager communication and promoting public participation [8]. The Baishi Village history museum may combine documentary materials, texts, images and physical object exhibits to connect local cultural relics, oral history records, audio-visual archives and cultural symbols, forming documentation of village development trajectories.

Its in-depth value lies in realizing "social production of space." Instead of static displays only, the village history museum can become "perceivable history." For example, a villager-story wall can be set up where residents of all generations participate in co-construction via texts, images, or physical exhibits, turning the museum into a continuously growing living state venue. Within participatory practices, villagers evolve from exhibited objects into exhibitors and narrators. From the perspective of eyewitnesses, they narrate family stories, craftsmanship insights, and life changes, enhancing exhibits' authenticity and appeal

and strengthening identification with cultural identity.

Under community-building, the village history museum can also function as a platform for community governance and subjectivity cultivation. Baishi Village may hold a villager deliberation day on a monthly basis under the leadership of the village committee, for discussing and voting on matters including road renovation, festival events, and annual plans for the Duan inkstone cooperative. A village affairs public suggestion bulletin board can be set up to display project progress in real time and collect feedback. In this way, the village history museum becomes a base for fostering public spirit and improving governance capacity.

Village history and culture constitute vital cultural capital for mitigating population outflow and achieving endogenous development. Baishi Village may build a themed village history museum relying on the Duan inkstone industry or integrate it with rural tourism to create culture-tourism nodes. Nevertheless, economic value only serves as an additional benefit; priority shall be given to realizing cultural and social values, with moderate and appropriate exploitation conducted when conditions permit [9].

5. Conclusion

Community-building provides a solution for addressing broken cultural inheritance and weakened community consciousness. The case of Baishi Village illustrates that community renewal shall be grounded in local realities, take residents as main subjects, and link up with governance mechanisms. Oral-history interviews can awaken cultural genes, while "micro-renovation" facilitates transformation of cultural context and reconstruction of identity.

Still, certain limitations exist within this research: oral-history sources are mostly collected from elder inheritors with insufficient representation of younger generations. Given Baishi Village's special resources as "No. 1 Village of Duan Inkstone", the proposed path does not enjoy universal applicability [10]. Future research may expand sample coverage by incorporating voices of youth and migrant residents, carry out cross-regional comparisons, and seek institutional and policy-level support.

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