The Identified Legacy
-- The Past and Present Lives of Beijing Traditional Folk Art

Anji Xiao *, Sipeng Li

Department of Literature and art, Communication University of China, Beijing, CO 100000, China

* Corresponding author: Anji Xiao (Email: 13520794236@163.com)

Abstract: This paper delves into the heritage preservation of the folk-art culture of the Tianqiao area in Beijing, known for its vibrant traditional drama. It argues that stamping a culture as ‘heritage’ suggests that it’s extinct, since it overlooks the continuous evolution of this culture. The concept of ‘heritagization’ is explored to illustrate the challenges and rewards of cultural preservation, suggesting that while it is crucial to preserve key aspects of culture, simplified representation or distortion must be avoided. As society modernizes, traditional art forms like the Tianqiao folk culture evolve and their original audience diminishes. This paper discusses the complex dynamics of culture, privilege, class, and socio-economic forces in contemporary society, arguing against the commodification of culture. It stresses the need for a recalibration of efforts towards preserving cultural heritage, bearing in mind the rapid pace of urbanization and economic development.

Keywords: Folk Art; Heritagization; Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection.

1. Introduction

The folk-art culture of the Tianqiao area in Beijing, containing a unique and rich folklore since the Ming and Qing Dynasties, serves as an alternative representation of the old Beijing charm. It is also a vibrant cradle for many intangible cultural heritages, which may not shine brightly but breathe with life. Despite their present “hallowed” statuses, these folk arts were still part of extremely active and stable communities less than one hundred years ago, confusedly but vividly situated in the “remote rivers and lakes”. An advertisement in the Tianqiao Water Heart Pavilion during the Republic of China era offers a glimpse into the vibrant conditions of Old Tianqiao: “Since our opening this summer, the pavilion is spacious and cool, and the tea service is excellent.” [1] It was once a hub for water and land transportation, where performers alternately took to the stage amid the corridors and tile houses. From 1912 to the 1950s, decaying Manchus streamed into Tianqiao, located in the southern city of Beijing. In addition to the large Han population gathering here during the Qing Dynasty, large-scale relocation of merchants, peddlers, and folk artists took place from the Forbidden City, Dashilar and areas around East and West Wengeheng. [2]

In this accessible and densely populated Old Beijing Tianqiao, a distinct folk-art era emerged. It was the birthplace of various unique art forms such as crosstalk, Beijing rhymed drum, storytelling, Clapper Opera, and also the stage for Peking Opera, shadow play, and magic mirror. However, due to the convergence of diverse social groups and less-than-perfect legal system and management, it once became a “flower of evil”- open gambling and secret prostitution, bullies rampant. Mr. Lao, she wrote in his essay “Tianqiao,” “In fact, before the liberation, Tianqiao was the most chaotic and darkest place in Beijing. It’s not big news when one or two people get injured or killed there.” [2] However, on this barren soil, grotesque but never weak flowers grew, with a strong and intense beauty. Such rich Tianqiao folk arts in Beijing are being methodically preserved as a heritage. But can the folk culture of Tianqiao area really be called a heritage? Are we preserving their true faces? If there are boundaries to cultural intervention, where are they?

By further questioning those issues, we are elevated to a grand and abstract conceptual layer. Before conducting any research, we need to confront the most essential question: what is “heritage”? Interpreted literally, it limits the gaze of the observer, and the way we look at something determines how we deal with it. "Heritage (inheritance)" comes from legal terminology and is most often understood as “legitimate property left by a natural person,” inherently carrying the attribute of “something already dead.” When we assume the culture of a specific area as heritage, we certify that the once vibrant culture has died, conclusively label and brand it, cut off the seamless time with an outsider’s gaze and flatten it, point out history and dissociate from it. It is due to our inevitable affection for the past and a hypocritical sense of mourning responsibility that heritage differs fundamentally from history.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. Tianqiao Folk Art Culture as a Heritage

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Heritage is like a monument erected after the death of vitality; a public idol constructed ex post facto. Real history is the respect for objectivity, yet seemingly cold and rigid true experience. Many existing so-called historical studies actually tend to study heritage. But the reason we do not equate the two is that if the term “heritage” is analyzed from the perspective of cultural heritage - it is defined in academia as things that exist or can be inherited and continued, the environment, and benefits passed from predecessors to descendants, which is the legacy with one or more political, cultural, social life and other value - it has other more controversial attributes.

Of course, the specific heritage does not completely die because of our identification. Here, we discuss more about the conceptual schema and cognitive positioning of it. While
defining heritage, we are also continuously constructing it to maximize its value as something that can be ‘used for us’. Nietzsche controversially pointed out that there is only what is made, not what is discovered. To name a concept, a culture, or a time and space is to shape it to a certain extent. Heritage, while perpetuating, inevitably accompanies alienation, and this alienation is also an important method to protect it from being completely disconnected. Folklorists call this the process of assessing and selecting resources for emphasis on protection and inheritance, "heritagization". The folk-art culture centered on Tianqiao in the South City is undergoing such a process. Although it is the birthplace of most of the Beijing’s folk culture, as a “designated and constructed intangible cultural heritage,” it has, to a certain extent, been stripped of the matrix that it relies on for survival, with its value determined by the present. As interpreted by the historian Hobsbawm, “inventing traditions” represents the construction of traditions with rational organizational forms, but due to the non-quantifiable factors that constitute the tradition itself such as locational characteristics, interpersonal networks, values, cultural backgrounds etc., if it is hastily determined in a simplified form, it will devise increasingly from itself. [3] Although there have been countless emerging movements on the protection of various heritages, cultural resource management systems, tourism projects, and ancillary products, it is challenging for heritage to maintain its authenticity. Especially in the context of the 21st century, heritage is more like a medal given to the past by the "present".

However, we should not be pessimistic. The social trend towards defining and “protecting” heritage has pros and cons. The present is historicizing itself. With the rapid development of electronic technology today, everything that currently exists has become a phenomenon of history once it is imprinted in memory. Therefore, innovation and heritagization have unexpectedly presented a kind of synchronization. However, it’s regrettable that some cultures, due to qualities such as delay or slowness, are incompatible with this phenomenon, resulting in extinction by the rolling wheels of history. For example, Tianqiao’s traditional art that relies on living in spaces planned around the Hutongs, old lanes and Old Beijing’s residential areas, if not interfered with, has almost no possibility of continuing in the 21st century and will automatically disappear under the pervasive encroachment of modernity - but heritagization protects the culture from this damage to the greatest extent. The real start of the heritagization process of Tianqiao folk art was in 1949 after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. In the process of modernization with the West as a benchmark, Old Beijing underwent a stigmatization process centred around the criticism of some of its content. Meanwhile, it utilized its various economic and social locational effects that emerged from the changes, and degenerated into a largely objectified existence. Since the 21st century, the intangible cultural heritage movement has gradually risen, and the Tianqiao folk art has only begun to make a limited return to the folk arts.

Artists from “lower class” Old Beijing, riding the wave of people becoming the masters of their homes, have become workers and even artists. Tianqiao in the south of Beijing began to establish rap groups, Clapper Opera troupes, cultural and art branches, union theater schools etc., according to certain regulations. The less than twenty years that followed can be considered the golden age of Tianqiao’s folk culture. It did not abandon the expansive charm of its roots, yet it grew complete and efficient wings for managing itself. However, as the unstoppable trend of modern construction progressed, with ongoing urban renovation and gradual changes to social divisions of labor, the architectural sites of the Tianqiao area are almost untraceable, and performance art as well as cultural scenes are protected as the focus of intangible cultural heritage. Cultural symbols have gradually separated from the places that created them. Regardless, can they really be separated? If there is an “invisible hand” shaping the principal. How would it exist?

2.2. Tianqiao Folk Art Culture as a Heritage

Before the term “intangible cultural heritage” was officially adopted for folk art in 1999, the field experienced a long period of evolution. Folklore studies, with a special focus on Tianqiao Art in this paper, emerged alongside modernization efforts. A mainstream viewpoint, propagated by Astrid Swenson, mentions that the concept of heritage approximately took shape around the 18th century bourgeois modernization and matured in the 19th century with the rise of world expositions. [4] With the display and promotion of cultural entities from around the globe, an increasing number of scholars began to pay attention and study the "cultural heritage". In the initial exploration of the discipline, the definition and preservation approaches were mostly influenced by European civilization, causing a complete severance between the “past time” represented by heritage and the present, which not only denied the possibility of heritage evolving in modern times, but also obscured the vivid nature and continuous vitality of the heritage.

The reduction of any form of vitality does not happen instantaneously but has a close relationship with inheritance and dissemination. Folk culture, as an art form rooted in secular villages for entertainment, is essentially "bottom-to-bottom". Therefore, it is more meaningful to accurately analyze how modern shifts in class, perspective, and values affect the ability of cultural transmission and cultural vitality rather than starting from a macro level. The once overt class barriers have now transformed into discreet information barriers. As everything moves from extreme division towards intermingling during the process of de-feudalization, economic barriers and class divides, especially in cultural consumption, are rapidly diminishing. For the masses, experiencing all types of art and culture has transformed from a luxury to a choice.

From this perspective, it seems that the increase in choice benefits all forms of culture. However, the Tianqiao folk culture was generally determined by the academic community as a culture that “lived” in old China and “died” in the new era. [5] As class barriers decrease, cultural vitality seems to decline. How should this be interpreted? We must revisit the natural consequence of class genesis - privilege. Just as peace and prosperity were the privileges of dignitaries, folk culture was the privilege of common people. It was closely tied to identity, providing comfort zones that brought a sense of security. Since we all shared the same "privileges", we appeared particularly pure and friendly to each other. “Choices” were also simple and straightforward during those times.

However, when social class stopped being the main influencer of our identity, the privileges of the dignitaries and common people disappeared together. As per Hume’s view: if anyone seriously studies the proof function of memory for personal identity, they will not find completeness but
fragmentation. [6] The audience structure for this form of art becomes complex and diverse, far more than during the era of song and dance rivers and lakes. On the axis of self-identity, the ways to identify our positions are being replaced by economic strength, minority taste, and even the power of novelty. We naturally follow trends and progress with the times, ignoring seemingly more “old” options in our choices, thus spectacularizing some old and vivid civilizations. Art was forced to alter in order to “cater” to our manner of choosing, leading to its eventual demise. The reason why audiences become anxious and confused is that they are bombarded with an overload of complex information, and the multitude of diverging paths cut off their possibility of returning to their comfort zone. The communicators themselves are in a state of confusion and the possibility of returning to their comfort zone. The communicators create a huge kaleidoscope out of countless beautiful yet broken mirrors, leaving audiences on the viewing side overwhelmed and helpless. The revolving pieces of art inside the kaleidoscope are rich and chaotic, referencing themselves. Initiatives that encourage people to visit museums and exhibitions took a turn in the wrong direction; museums inherently carry educational functions, and no matter how high their authenticity, they can never truly evoke a sense of nostalgia belonging to old streets and houses.

After the renaming of folklore to “intangible cultural heritage” at a meeting in Washington in 1999, there was a fundamental shift in how such heritage should be protected. [7] It shifted from studying the remains of the past to a system centered on inheritors of the culture, emphasizing the importance of cultural practice and inheritance communities. However, this change does not seem to apply to Chinese art being heritagized. Discussions on this issue need to be based on a mainstream view describing Chinese social relations, i.e., the “differential pattern”. As a rural society, China’s actions are united by family clans, and the cultural creations are in keeping with Taoism.

The West pertains to the individual as the unit; thus, the arts created focusing on the practitioner would have a steady pivot. In China, the journey appears more challenging due to the decentralized nature of its culture. The intrinsic reason being that the principle of “heritage group-centered” limits the people who should receive a certain kind of art, positioning the right to speak and authority of art in a few “inheritors”. Overwatering a big tree neglects the countless budding seeds in the soil.

Media practitioners today are striving to integrate various media forms, as seen in China’s variety show "The Great Chinese Music Show". Despite using advanced technologies like 4K, the broadcast’s efficiency and promotion lag far behind popular music programs, and even the traditional Beijing art section does not get approval from the regulars who walk the Tianqiao of Beijing. In recent years, many other TV shows and online variety shows responding to the call to protect non-material cultural heritage have emerged, grinding received by” to “how it can be known by more people”. However, with the departure of old audiences, that era is indeed irretrievable. Perhaps we should rethink how to protect culture from the perspective of cultural heritage dissemination, shifting our focus from “who it will be received by” to "how it can be known by more people”.

In the pursuit of capital, money is the fundamental cause of artistic death. Peter Brook, money is the fundamental cause of artistic death. [8] In the pursuit of capital, creating the greatest benefit in the shortest time becomes the guiding principle, choking the life out of artistic creation in such a shallow environment. This volatile cycle of production and consumption, where the price of art appreciation has barred the masses, has turned art into amber created by capital, meant only for distant viewing. The commodified approach to art creates disillusionment and feelings of betrayal among audiences who haven’t decided to enter the art halls and yet bear the disappointments brought by the capitalization of art.

Indeed, if we cannot protect Quyi and the numerous cultural forms in specific areas across China, without sacrificing certain degrees of economic development and urbanization, we may have to consider a possible assumption: that we are incapable of preserving every culture due to the natural limit in civilization storage.

In this context, what we want to emphasize is not that "cultural preservation is selective", but that we cannot deliberately make choices in every matter. If no one regards it as a heritage, it is the power of oblivion. Memory only becomes a science after "death". For any culture, whether we
exalt it on the altar for admiration or utilize its essence in the present vision, there is a forced ossification. From the perspective of memory research, the heritagization process of Beijing Tianqiao is the process of gradually replacing memory power with seal carving memory techniques. Temporal memory power is accompanied by forgetting and needs to be constantly “retrieved” in the process of experience and production; Spatial memory technique is a slice of history, a highly socialized “storage-reading” method. The origin myth story of mnemonics can help us to understand better: Simonides, an ancient Greek poet, was the only survivor of an earthquake at a banquet. When the king asked him to identify the corpses, he called out the names of each deceased person by recollecting the distribution of guests on each seat. The heritagization presumes an absolute present, identifying each corpse based on the seat distribution remaining in the ruins and labeling it. The whole process can be described as a purely spatial method, where the dimension of time is filtered out.

On traditional basis, memory is determined by writing and storage, now it is prescribed by negation, destruction, vacancy, and oblivion within the framework of historical consciousness. But heritagization deprives us of the ability to forget. We alienate our memories, spatializing them on a temporal scale, clipping memory fragments from any time node and compressing them into the stack of old papers for self-pity. Those who are “honoured” to be identified as heritages are in the minority after all, more are silent forgetters. Some pity themselves in the dump of old papers, their traces of existence can be found in the documents; others - particularly intangible cultural heritage - erode over time, completely forgotten in the river of time. According to Augustine, forgetting is a conspirator of remembrance, true remembrance and amnesia are inseparable. It’s like retrieving the inner-hidden text of reused parchment, a faint reflection of primordial experience that no path can reach again.

We can’t deny the contribution of “heritage” to the art and culture, but what about civilization development? The memory of any civilization is limited, there is no palace of memory in the true sense, only selective reconstruction. If we choose to preserve this oral tradition this time, and a song the next, or even the debris that has been discarded and never reprocessed after demolition, we clearly understand that we cannot perpetually preserve space in the process of urban development, but we dare not admit that cultural survival in the process of civilization development is limited.

3. Conclusion

The manuscript should include a conclusion. In this section, summarize what was described in your paper. Future directions may also be included in this section. Authors are strongly encouraged not to reference multiple figures or tables in the conclusion; these should be referenced in the body of the paper.

The artistic works in the world of traditional storytelling will always be passed on, “As long as there is humanity, or people with eyes; This poem will persist, with you forever, for a thousand years.” They die amidst bits of old paper; they live in the threads of words and phrases. When we strum the strings, just once, even if it’s only a faint echo of the three-stringed instrument, that dirty, vibrant, moving world of traditional storytelling, our forever golden age in dreams, will return to us. The blue-green, old world of traditional storytelling - through different eyes, due to the variability of imagination and appreciation itself, they would not be like any dead thing, frozen and urgently awaiting construction…

Having known the world of traditional storytelling for over a year now, we dare not claim to be familiar with it. But, as tourists from the 21st century who have formed an emotional connection with this place, I admit that we are biased. In fact, heritage is a historical process with a “human touch”. In this work that can still be called a "result", we have had many doubts and criticisms, even once believing it should be forgotten. As we write, we truly feel, "All things in the world can be forgiven". Because we are all people living in time, we all have nostalgia for the past, and an unavoidable obsession with the "golden age".

Calvino, in "Invisible Cities", described such a non-existent place: the traveler, after a long journey, finally arrived at the city of his dreams, where there was wantonness, discipline, the bright and declining smiles of loved ones, and finally stopped in front of a wall in the square - old people sat there watching the young people of the past, and he sat side by side with these old men, the desire of the beginning was already a memory. We are like travelers in old Beijing, because we can never go back, because while all history is going away, the people who experienced it are still sitting in front of the wall of time, so we worry and regret, and make sacred statues. Once we were face to face, now only a silent forest of stone tablets remains.

“We keep the fire alive, for those who are gone.”

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Mr. Xiao Guang for his strong support for this project all along. He has provided us with first-hand information essential for our research into intangible cultural heritage of Tianqiao, such as the history of Xuanwu storytelling troupe, operatic arts and culture, the distinctive three-stringed instrument, and memories of Tianqiao. Mr. Xiao Guang is an ordinary person in the world of traditional storytelling who demonstrates chivalrous spirit and ambition. Art is his purest pursuit throughout his life. We offer our highest respect to Mr. Xiao Guang, and wish him good health, peace, and happiness.

In addition, this work was supported in part by a grant from Mr. Baoshan Li, Professor Long Fu, Yanran Qu, Tianwei Hu, Xudong Zhao recording team, Yi Bao, Zelin Zheng, Jingwen Han, Yuzhuang Jiang, Mingxuan Guo, Dairui Zhao, and the families of all our team members for their tremendous assistance. Without your support, we could not have accomplished this project. Salute to all of you!

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