

The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Chinese Ethnic Minorities: Taking the Fish Skin Culture of the Hezhen people as an Example

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Abstract: As a unique ethnic minority in Heilongjiang Province, the Hezhen people have developed a unique fish skin culture based on the unique natural geography of their settlement area. Fish skin culture as one of China's "intangible cultural heritage", has a very high cultural value, economic value and social value, the protection and inheritance of the endangered Hezhen fish skin culture task has become urgent.

Keywords: Hezhen people; Fish skin culture; Intangible cultural heritage; Protection and inheritance.

1. Introduction

Hezhe is one of the "seven small ethnic groups" in China (according to the data of the sixth national census in 2021, and in the order of population size, they are: Tatar, Gaoshan, Luoba, Hezhe, Dulong, Oroqen people, and Menba). Hezhe has a long history and is one of the unique ethnic groups in northeast China. The Hezhen people mainly live in the Sanjiang Plain formed by the confluence of Heilong River, Songhua River and Wusuli River and in the Wanda, Mountain remains. Due to the vast living area and relatively small population of the Hezhen people, they have more self-proclaimed names, such as "Nabei", "Nanai", "Naniao", etc. The Hezhen people have their own language, but do not have their own written language. Most of the Hezhen people use Cyrillic to record their daily words.

The Hezhen people live along the river and survive along it, relying on fishing and hunting to support daily production and life. After a long period of development and evolution, a unique and distinctive fish skin culture has emerged. The technique of making fish skin from the Hezhe ethnic group was also approved by the State Council on May 20th, 2006 and included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage lists.

Protecting the fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group and inheriting intangible cultural heritage is of great significance for protecting China's traditional culture, protecting and inheriting the cultural diversity of ethnic minorities, especially those with smaller populations, promoting the improvement of national cultural consciousness and innovation, and enhancing the country's cultural soft power.

2. The Reasons for the Formation of the Fish Skin Culture

2.1. The Unique Natural Environment in the Hezhen people's Habitation

The Hezhen people mainly reside in Heilongjiang Province. Heilongjiang Province is located in the Sanjiang Plain, which has vast land and abundant resources. The rivers are crisscrossing, and there are abundant water resources and aquatic products, including the famous northern cold-water

fish, such as big pacific-salmon, sturgeon, and other rare fish. With abundant natural resources, the Hezhen people's habitation is also praised as the "land of fish and rice".

Hezhen people have lived along the river for a long time. The middle section of Heilong River, Songhua River and Wusuli River basin are the main residential areas of Hezhen people. Moreover, the Sanjiang Plain, with its abundant water resources, provides sufficient natural conditions for the survival and development of the Hezhen people. Surrounded by mountains and rivers, rivers crisscross, providing the people of Hezhe with the benefits of transportation and a source of life, as well as laying a solid natural foundation for the development of Hezhen fish skin culture.

2.2. Multiple Aquatic Resources

Heilong River, Songhua River and Wusuli River are rich in aquatic products. Among them are the most famous beluga and sturgeon. There are also big pacific-salmon (salmon) born in the river, live in the sea, and dead in the river, as well as the famous "Three Hua" (Aohua, Bianhua and Jihua) and "Five Luo" (Zheluo, Faluo, Yaluo, Huluo and Tongluo). The rich resources of aquatic products have laid a solid material foundation for the formation of the Hezhe ethnic fish skin culture.

2.3. Long Ethnic Fishing Experience

The Hezhen people live by water all year round, and fishing is their main production activity and living source. The long history of fishing production of the Hezhe ethnic group can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, about 6000 years ago. The Hezhen people have accumulated a lot of experience in long-term fishing practices, and have become familiar with the habits and characteristics of various fish species. They can choose fishing locations appropriately based on the habits and characteristics of different fish species, and can produce exquisite and user-friendly fishing tools that cannot be compared to other ethnic groups.

The people of Hezhe have integrated fishing activities into all aspects of their lives, laying a strong social foundation for the formation of fish skin culture.

2.4. The Diligence, Wisdom, and Creativity of the Hezhen people

The ancestors of the Hezhen people mainly relied on fishing as their main livelihood, supplemented by hunting. In summer, most of them live in conical tents built with grass. These conical tents are called “Cuoluo” by the Hezhen people. The materials of “Cuoluo” are lightweight and easy to find, making it convenient for the Hezhen people to migrate and for year-round fishing and hunting. At the same time, the Hezhen people used valuable fish caught, such as salmon, to eat and dried them for long-term storage. Another part of the extra caught fish is often cooked with salt to make dried fish floss.

With the development and continuous progress of social productivity, the cooking methods of fish are constantly increasing, and fishing techniques and methods are also constantly improving. In addition to consuming the meat of the caught fish, the Hezhen people also rely on their unique wisdom to fully utilize the fish skin and make fish skin clothing. The fish skin clothing is not only lightweight, but also warm, and can keep the Hezhen people away from cold during the winter of Heilongjiang Province. At the same time, the people of Hezhe relied on their strong creativity to create fish skin artifacts, fish skin decorations, fish skin paintings, and colorful fish skin decorations.

The Hezhen people believe in Shamanism and advocate for nature. Shamanism believes that humans and animals have equal souls. This religious concept of advocating nature has also given strong vitality to the fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group. It laid a solid intellectual foundation for the formation of fish skin culture.

3. Production Process of Fish Skin Clothing

3.1. Material Selection

Fish skin is the basic material for making fish skin clothing. The Hezhen people will select and classify fish skin based on its thickness, uniformity, softness, and natural texture, in order to make different clothing. For the production of robes, the Hezhen people often use the skin of fish such as beluga, salmon, carp, catfish, and grassroots as raw materials. Using the skin of fish such as Huaitou, Xilin, Zheluo, pike, and salmon, make Wula (a type of boots worn in winter in Northeast China, made of leather with *Carex meyeriana* Kunth inside). You can also use the skin of fish such as Huaitou, Zheluo, pike to make pants. Although the thickness of fish skin is very thin, clothing made from it is very warm. Zhang Jinyan once wrote in *Ning Pagoda Landscape*: Wearing fish skin as clothing is as warm as wearing cowhide.

3.2. Peeling off the Fish Skin

After selecting the fish skin, it is time to peel it off. To completely peel off a piece of fish skin, first use a sharp-edged tool to make a horizontal circle around the joint between the head and body of the selected fish, and then use the tip of the knife to vertically cut along the belly of the fish. After scraping the fish skin in the above order, use one hand to hold the head of the fish, and the other hand to use a wooden scraper to start peeling off the skin and flesh from the joint between the head and body, sequentially scraping until it reaches before the tail fin. Finally, peel off the skin on both sides of the fish body along the fish spine from head to tail.

At this point, the entire fish skin has been peeled off.

3.3. Sun-dried Fish Skin

The method of drying fish skin in winter and summer is different. In summer, the Hezhen people will first tighten the entire fish skin and nail it to the cool and ventilated wall inside the house with wooden nails, so that the fish skin is completely dehydrated without losing its natural toughness. Alternatively, stick the fish skin to a cool and ventilated area of the fence to dry, but avoid exposure to the scorching sun. In winter, the Hezhen people would put the fish skin next to the fire and dry it.

3.4. Ripen Fish Skin

The early tools used by the Hezhen people to ripen fish skin were wooden chopping boards and mallets. With the continuous development of production, the people of Hezhe have explored and accumulated experience through long-term production practice, and produced a more advanced tool for ripening leather - the wooden chopper. When using a wooden chopper to ripen fish skin, the Hezhen people first sprinkle a layer of corn flour between every two fish skins to absorb the fish oil and remove the fishy smell. They then roll several fish skins together and use the method of chopping grass to forcefully press the fish skin to make it ripe evenly.

3.5. Cutting and Splicing

The splicing process of fish skin is not about randomly splicing together, but rather following the pattern direction and color depth of the fish skin. Multiple fish skins are spliced together to form a large piece of fish skin, which is cut according to the gender and body shape of the wearer, and finally sewn into a garment.

3.6. Artistic Process

The artistic process of fish skin is divided into two parts: dyeing and decoration. The dyeing of fish skin clothing is made by dyeing the flowers, leaves, or stems of plants with natural colors. According to historical records, the colorful fish-scale patterns on women's clothing are dyed with petals of various colors. For example, using orchid grass can dye the fish skin blue, while using rhododendron can dye the fish skin red. If alum is added during the dyeing process, the color of the clothing can never fade. After dyeing is completed, the garment maker will decorate the fish skin with patterns through methods such as piping or edging, and embellish decorations to make the clothes more beautiful.

4. The Inheritance Value of the Fish Skin Culture

4.1. Cultural Value

The Hezhe ethnic group has a long history of development, and the Hezhen people have created a rich and colorful fish skin culture with a long and profound cultural heritage, relying on the unique geographical conditions of their habitations. The dissemination and development of fish skin culture not only demonstrate the strong creativity of the Hezhen people, but also demonstrate the profound cultural heritage of the Hezhe ethnic group. The fish skin culture has promoted the development of the traditional culture of the Hezhe ethnic group, injected strong vitality into it, added a colorful touch to the traditional culture of the Chinese nation, and promoted the exchange and integration of different

cultures among ethnic groups.

4.2. Economic Value

The fish skin culture is a core component of the traditional culture of the Hezhe ethnic group. Fish skin culture covers a variety of types and involves diverse styles, contributing valuable cultural resources to the social progress and economic development of the Hezhe ethnic group. The people of Hezhe utilized the unique charm and influence of fish skin culture to establish a series of fish skin culture art museums and craft workshops with fish skin culture as their main business content. By creating their own cultural brand, the Hezhen people have made more countries, regions, and ethnic groups at home and abroad aware of the rich and colorful cultural connotations of the Hezhen fish skin culture, promoting the sustainable development of the economy in the Hezhen people's residential areas.

4.3. Social Value

The fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group is the crystallization of the wisdom of several generations of its people, and a powerful manifestation of the Hezhe ethnic group's religious belief in nature. The fish skin culture strongly expresses the Hezhen people's views on nature, life, and values. The exquisite fish skin handicrafts reflect the wisdom, strong creativity, and bold and straightforward personality of the Hezhen people, showcasing their strong national emotions of love for peace, unity, and friendliness. The fish skin culture is also an important carrier of the strong national cohesion of the Hezhe ethnic group.

5. Current Status of the Researches on the Fish Skin Culture

5.1. Status in China

According to verifiable literature records, China began studying the fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group as early as the 1920s. For example, works such as the Ning Pagoda Annal and Jilin Annal of the Qing Dynasty have detailed records of the Hezhe ethnic group, including records of their surnames, as well as records of the Hezhen people's economy, life, cultural customs, etc., with illustrations and text. During the period of the Republic of China, Mr. Ling Chunsheng's book *The Hezhen People on the Lower Songhua River* is a key work that serves as a link between the past and the future in the study of Hezhen fish skin clothing. In the late 1950s, the inheritance and development of the fish skin technique of the Hezhe ethnic group gradually became a key focus of national attention on the cultural inheritance of ethnic minorities. Among them, the Social Survey of the Hezhe Ethnic Group was completed during this period. The Social Survey of the Hezhe Ethnic Group has fully improved the gap in previous research on the Hezhe ethnic group and played a key role in the study of the Hezhe ethnic culture and fish skin skills by subsequent scholars.

5.2. Status Abroad

Foreign research on the fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group mainly focuses on fish skin clothing, represented by Russia and the United States. The habitations of the Hezhe ethnic group is closer to that of the Nanai ethnic group in Russia, and the ethnic cultures of the Hezhe and Nanai are similar. Like the Hezhe ethnic group, the Nanai ethnic group has a complete process of making fish skin clothing.

5.3. The Current Status of English Translation of Fish Skin Culture

Search the keywords "English translation of Hezhe ethnic group fish skin culture" and the simplified keywords "Hezhen fish skin culture, English" on CNKI and Weipu, the relevant paper is 0. From this, it can be seen that there is currently a gap in the field of English translation research on the Hezhen fish skin culture. Scholars and translators can conduct researches and translation from this perspective to fill this gap.

6. Protection and Development of Hezhen Fish Skin Culture

6.1. Current Status of the Inheritance

Culture is the core and foundation of a nation, and an important source of cultural vitality and sustainable development for a nation. When the old relations of production cannot meet people's current needs for material culture and social development, new relations and modes of production will emerge. The unique fishing and hunting culture of the Hezhe ethnic group is based on the unique natural environment of the Hezhen people's habitations. If the natural environment changes, the fishing and hunting culture of the Hezhe ethnic group will change accordingly.

In recent years, with the acceleration of industrialization process, industrial wastewater is constantly discharged into the Heilong River, Songhua River and Wusuli River basins where Hezhen people rely on for survival. The species and quantity of fish in the river are greatly reduced, which makes it difficult to maintain the daily production and living needs of Hezhen people. With the improvement of people's living standards and the increasing demand for fishing, uncontrolled fishing methods have placed the already fragile ecological environment in a more vulnerable and dangerous situation. The actual number of fish available for fishing is far from meeting people's needs, leading to a significant decrease in the income that the Hezhen people can obtain through fishing and hunting economy. When people's material and cultural needs cannot be met, the Hezhen people, in order to maintain their survival and social development, begin to seek new paths to change the traditional production and lifestyle of the Hezhen ethnic group.

In recent years, the Hezhen people have gradually changed from traditional economic models dominated by fishing and hunting to agriculture. As the production and lifestyle changed, their production techniques also changed accordingly. New cultural forms have gradually integrated into the daily production and life of the Hezhen people, and the new generations are becoming increasingly unfamiliar with the fishing techniques and fish skin making techniques that their nation has long inherited, and even completely unable to master them. Although at present, the fish skin making techniques of the Hezhe ethnic group have not loss, with the aging of the older generation of Hezhen people, they will eventually die, and their leaving represents the decline or even disappearance of the unique fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group. Therefore, while vigorously developing the modernization, it is also necessary to accelerate the pace and integrate the traditional fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group with the modern new socio-economic form.

In the process of writing this paper, the author read many relevant papers and found that scholars and university students studying fish skin culture are generally concentrated

in Heilongjiang Province. This also indicates that the research and domestic dissemination of fish skin culture are relatively limited. Fish skin culture originated in Heilongjiang Province, but due to limited publicity efforts, its dissemination and development are also limited here, and it has not received good publicity nationwide.

6.2. Inheritance Measures

Firstly, emphasis should be placed on cultivating inheritors of fish skin culture. One of the most important issues in the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage is to protect the inheritors. Once the inheritors are protected, the dissemination of culture is also protected. Nowadays, most of the fish skin skills of the Hezhe ethnic group are mastered by the older generation of Hezhen people. How to transfer the fish skin skills to the new generation, break the inherent “family inheritance” and “national inheritance” thinking of the older generation of Hezhen people, broaden the scope of inheritor identity, and make the Hezhen fish skin culture “inheritable” is one of the key issues to be solved now.

Secondly, the pace of rescuing endangered traditional skills should be accelerated. Information technology can be utilized to record and protect the collected cultural relics and materials in the form of audio, video, and other modern methods. With the continuous development of modern production technology, it is possible to combine it with modern technology on the basis of existing fish skin techniques, and continuously develop and innovate. The traditional Hezhen fish skin production technique is mainly based on manual.

In the form of socialist modern market economy, in order to make the production method of the Hezhe ethnic group better combined with the modern economy, under the premise of maintaining the inheritance and development of the original traditional fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group, it is possible to integrate the modern art style and technology craft on the basis of the original traditional handmade, simplify the fish skin craft production, facilitate the learning of the inheritors, make the fish skin crafts made with a more modern style, more charming, and thus attract more people’s attention to the Hezhen fish skin culture.

Finally, the government should improve and strengthen management mechanisms. In addition to the spontaneous protection and inheritance measures of the Hezhen fish skin culture among the people, the government should also actively organize and carry out specialized protection and research work targeting the Hezhen fish skin culture, formulate and establish specialized laws and regulations to strengthen the protection and supervision of the Hezhen fish skin culture. At the same time, the government can also provide economic support for the inheritance of fish skin culture by increasing economic support for areas inhabited by the Hezhe ethnic group. In other aspects, the government can also increase the promotion of the Hezhen fish skin culture, raise people’s attention to it, and make fish skin culture a key project in Hezhe tourism culture through the guidance of government departments. At the same time, local governments can also increase investment in the aquaculture industry in Hezhen habitations, and achieve the goal of expanding the development of Hezhen culture by developing the fishery economy of the Hezhe ethnic group. Government intervention is usually direct and effective, which can strengthen people’s awareness of the Hezhen fish skin culture.

7. Summary

The fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group is not only one of the representatives of the excellent culture of the Hezhe ethnic group, but also a shining pearl in the traditional culture of the Chinese nation. The fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group not only highlights the noble spiritual character of the Hezhen people’s reverence for nature and life, but also highlights the strong creativity of the Hezhen people. Inheriting and promoting the fish skin culture is not only the obligation of the Hezhen people, but also the unshirkable responsibility of every Chinese nation. We should adapt to the development of the times, combine the traditional fish skin culture of the Hezhe ethnic group with modern technologies, continuously develop, innovate, and scientifically construct a fish skin culture inheritance and protection system, continuously study and explore, and strive to make the Hezhen fish skin culture shine more brightly.

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