

The analysis of Federations and Federation Phenomenon from the perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cultural Industries; Social organization; Inheritors; Henan; China

Abstract: The inheritor group in Henan Province of China has established the Henan Federation of Innovation and Industrialization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (the HFIAIICH), a social organization with the common purpose of promoting the positive development of the “Innovation and Industrialization of Intangible Cultural Heritage” and carrying out relevant work according to market demand. Based on the analysis of its causes and outlook of development, this article systematically clarifies the unique development pattern of this organization and the comprehensive characteristics of the federation phenomenon, discussing the impact of the unit of inheritors on the work for intangible cultural heritage.

1. Introduction

China has won brilliant achievements in the international field since acceding the Convention of the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. By the end of 2018, China had possessed 40 items on the heritage list of UNESCO (including List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in need of Urgent Safeguarding and Register of Best Safeguarding Practices), becoming the country with the largest number of intangible cultural heritage in the world. Although most “craftsmen” have completed the transition of their identities to “inheritors”, the universal problems of the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage are still obvious. Since 2010, more and more inheritors have begun to choose to combine intangible cultural heritage projects with the flourishing cultural (creative) industry, to obtain higher economic benefits through the market-oriented sales and commercialization of intangible cultural heritage projects. In that process, federations have gradually become the form of the organization. Taking Zhengzhou, Henan as an example, as of June 30, 2019, a total of 281 intangible cultural heritage items were registered^[1], among which 58 items had integrated into cultural (creative) industries. A government official once said: “The current work of government is still centered on intangible cultural heritage itself. We have noticed its combination with the cultural industry, and some inheritors have started to unit for their development. However, we don't have substantive policies to guide relevant work.”^[2]This trend not only provides new ideas for the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage in Zhengzhou, but also puts forward new requirements for the management and guidance of the government and relevant departments.

In the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO has put forward the core concept of “Community” concerning the living environment of intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of inheritance circumstances for intangible cultural heritage. For China, the concept of community was once clarified as “Rural Settlement or Rural Ecology”, but its meaning has changed under the rapid economic growth. The deep integration between urban

and rural areas has dissolved the dual structure of their opposition. The intangible cultural heritage items originally rooted in countryside have gradually combined with the business environment in cities, striving to continue the inheritance and development in the form of cultural and creative products. Therefore, the intangible cultural heritage ecosystem has tended to be a cultural category interwoven with complex relationships, which include far more than geography and kinship. On this basis, a new organizational form of “the Henan Federation of Innovation and Industrialization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (the HFIAIICH)” has emerged. The HFIAIICH is defined as a non-governmental organization originated from Henan province, taking the lead in exploring a new pattern with the core of promotion of intangible cultural heritage in China. The following sections investigate and discuss the HFIAIICH in detail, so that the research group can give an insight into the latest outlook of the circumstances where the intangible heritage culture is developing.

The survey of this article builds on the fieldwork lasting from September 1, 2018 to June 30, 2019. From September 1, 2018 to December 15, 2018, the fieldwork mainly continuously investigated the inheritors. From December 16, 2018 to April 20, 2019, the research focused on the activities carried out by the HFIAIICH. From 21st to 30th June, 2019, the theme of the survey concentrated on the organization form of the federations. The methods of investigation included fieldwork, interviews and telephone surveys. During this period, 15 units including Henan Heritage Experience Center were visited. The searching group investigated 67 intangible cultural heritage projects such as traditional skills, traditional arts and folklore in Zhengzhou City, which then expanded to Henan province. The group also interviewed 113 inheritors (including craftsmen), 5 principle leaders in the federation, 23 experts and scholars in related fields. Those 23 experts and scholars consisted of 5 civil servants in government agencies, 14 academics in universities, and 4 freelance scholars. The interview locations were mostly the stores or residences of inheritors and craftsmen in Jinshui District, Erqi District, and Guancheng Hui District in Zhengzhou. All the data, arguments and supports in this article without citation are derived from primary investigation sources.

2. Forming reasons and Development Outlook of the HFIAIICH

2.1. Forming reasons

As of July 30, 2019, the proportions of young people, middle-aged people, and elderly people in the HFIAIICH were respectively about 79%, 19%, and 2%. The factors that promote the gathering of inheritors can be summarized into the following three points:

2.1.1. The realistic demand with the core of economic interests.

75% of the inheritors admit that the main problems in the process of inheriting intangible cultural heritage are survival and promotion. The voice of concerning about the livelihood mainly comes from the youth group (The proportion of young inheritors joining the HFIAIICH for economic reasons is 82%). The problem of survival is reflected in the rising prices including rent and exhibition costs, and the problem of development is the imbalance between market supply and consumer demand. The contradiction between the urgent need to improve the livelihood and the disadvantaged economic plight makes the union of homogeneous groups an inevitable choice.

2.1.2. Geographical identity derived from localism.

64% of the inheritors in the HFIAIICH were introduced by their fellow townsmen. 80% of the middle-aged and old-aged inheritors believe that the prime factor for them to unite is the localism of Henan. The restrictive flow pattern which takes Henan as the outline forms a relatively stable social hierarchy, and the cultural ecological field of intangible cultural heritage is constructed with the joint participation of the craftsman group.

2.1.3. Cultural attraction and identity resonance in the dilemma of inheritance.

96% of the inheritors interviewed have a strong desire to contact and communicate with different types of inheritors, and 42 of them are running a network through social platforms such as WeChat.

A young inheritor engaged in leather carving said: “Because we are craftsmen, we can understand each other better.”^[3] Different forms of cultural expressions will show a higher level of affinity under the influence of external forces. The long-standing isolated inheritance pattern is not beneficial to the spread of intangible cultural heritage. The assistance and cooperation among the inheritors contribute to the embryo of the HFIAIICH.^[4]

2.2. Development Outlook of the HFIAIICH

2.2.1. Basic functions

For internal members, the main functions of the HFIAIICH are service and guidance. Relying on the platform of Internet, the federation has set up a net of Henan intangible cultural heritage and a WeChat Official Account of “discovering craftsmanship” to propagate and publicize intangible cultural heritage items of its members. Meanwhile, by setting up the WeChat group, the federation integrates existing cooperative relationships and independent inheritance context. The services for cultural and creative development mainly focus on creative designs, market evaluation, and the production of material packages.

The HFIAIICH provides members with guidance on fund application, company establishment, professional title assessment, legal consultation and so on. The HFIAIICH once helped the 92-year-old inheritor of “Houjiaguan” to sort out the application materials for the inheritor of the national intangible cultural heritage, and assisted the 31-year-old inheritor of rubbing skills to fill in the entry information. Now, the federation also provides targeted services by putting across policies, answering questions and other activities.

The external functions of the HFIAIICH are mainly reflected in business contacts and propaganda. As the representative of the Henan inheritor group, the HFIAIICH conducts interaction and cooperation with organizations, institutions or people in and outside the province. By promoting the relevant work of hypostatic stores related to culture and tourism, the HFIAIICH has opened high-quality market platforms and commercial communication channels for the inheritors in Henan Province, such as participating in the preparation of a series of shops in the CCD central street in Zhengzhou, the intangible cultural heritage base in Yuanjia village, Xinxiang city and so on.

In the aspect of publicity, the HFIAIICH has made great efforts to promote activities related to the combination of research and learning as well as social welfare. In recent years, it has successfully organized the first and second Central Plains Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition and other large scale activities like Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival in the hometown of Huangdi. Sun Guochao, the head of accounting affairs, said: “We identify whether the commercial activities are good or not at first, then we select the projects and communicate with the inheritors. At the same time, we also organize special activities for inheritors, such as the intangible cultural heritage festival and specialized township tourism.”^[5]

2.2.2. The role of leadership

The HFIAIICH plays the role of leader through its Elite Unit. The number of members of the Elite Unit has exchanged from three to five, then to fifteen. Among the five core members of the HFIAIICH, Liu Zheng, the founder of the HFIAIICH, is the leader of the Elite unit. He is in charge of coordinating the comprehensive operation of the federation, and the other four core members are respectively in charge of the financial accounting, publicity, cultural innovation and legal right protection. The remaining 10 members are mainly the inheritors who develop intangible cultural heritage brilliantly with good economic conditions. They are responsible for participating in the event planning and making decisions.

As for the examination and approval of important issues, the federation adopts the cooperative operation pattern centered on the collective resolution system. The Elite Unit publishes information at first and calls on the members to vote for their opinions. Then all members of the Elite Unit count the tickets and make collective decisions based on feedback. In the process of establishing the intangible cultural heritage base in Yuanjia village, Xinxiang city, all members of the HFIAIICH

voted for its construction, and then made overall planning for other details like the site selection or interior and exterior decoration.

2.2.3. Basic regulations and management methods

At present, there are more than 100 intangible cultural heritage items officially recorded in the HFIAIICH with more than 300 registered members. With the development of the HFIAIICH, the membership based on geography and kinship has led to a new code of conduct.

(1) Enrollment audit

Do not have negative records such as illegal crimes and bad credit.

Have relevant experience in the innovation and industrialization of intangible cultural heritage. The HFIAIICH will also give priority to the inheritors of intangible cultural heritage.

Willing to contribute, have a sense of responsibility and the overall situation.

(2) Selection standards for the members of the Elite Unit

Under the age of 45, in good health condition.

Have the identity of inheritors of intangible cultural heritage with the experience about the related work for more than one year, have a certain influence and possess excellent skills in organization and interaction.

The leader of the Elite Unit should serve for 4 -year term (can be re-elected), other core members should be reelected every 4 years. Resolution members should be replaced irregularly.

(3) Daily maintenance methods

The scales of the meetings are divided into the Elite Unit member meeting, relevant member expansion meeting and all member meeting according to different standards such as urgency and interest relevance. During the preparation period, the person in charge of the Elite Unit will draw up a list of participants according to the number of applicants, and adopt the principle of “Discuss the matter according to the quota, and judge the items on their merits”.

The online WeChat group is the main social channel among the federation members. For members who have provoked internal strife and disrupted solidarity, the federation will consider retaining or removing their membership appropriately.

3. The analysis of federations and the federation phenomenon

Although external factors like the community environment have inevitably changed during the process of urbanization, internal factors like the pattern of technology inheritance and the social culture of inheritors will not cause great differences when they leave the native land. To distinguish what will be discussed from other officially-managed intangible cultural heritage protection groups and organizations, the word “federation” will still be used on the basis of summarizing the primary characteristics of the HFIAIICH. A systematic analysis of such social federations based on regional and professional commonality with the common purpose of intangible cultural heritage innovation will be conducted, which adapts internal management based on collective decision-making and voluntary principles with the aim to enhance competitiveness through information exchange and self-regulation.

3.1. Spontaneity in the forming of the federations and the multilevel feature in the development.

The existence of the federations relies on the common needs and interests of inheritors and other related persons. But in the initial formation, they are more limited to the subjective judgment of the sponsors on the situation and environment at that time, with the lack of long-term planning, longstanding mechanisms and rational balance. At the same time, because the sponsors (or leaders) of the federations have isomorphic characteristics with administrative authority, academic authority, or economic authority, also for the reason that participants and recipients have the idea of being close to authority to acquire convenience when they promote the formation of the federation, it has spontaneity characterized by randomness and irrationality in the early forming.

The multilevel feature in the development of the federations mainly depends on the number of

audiences of different organizations. There are three prominent types: groups or organizations gathered for a certain skill, like Han Hua Bang in Zhengzhou, a group that mainly focuses on rubbing skills and promoting the portrait stone culture of the Han Dynasty, having nearly 50 people; groups and organizations gathered for common professions, such as the Zhengzhou Light Industry Art Association whose main audiences are artists and designers, having nearly 120 people; groups and organizations gathered for cultural promotion, like Ni Baocheng Folk Art Group which is committed to promoting folk art and non-heritage culture, having a size of nearly 300 people.

3.2. The informality and unit collaboration of the operation of the federations.

According to the surveys, most of the federations which form and develop in urban areas in Henan have not been formally registered under the Regulations on the Management of Registration of Social Organizations (the Regulations for short thereafter). The reason why some federations are not formally registered is not failing to meet the requirements of registration, but intentionally choosing this way after collective decision-making. Some leaders of the federations believe that groups and organizations established by the government and other official units will inevitably be interfered by units at a higher level. Activities, forms of organization, and management patterns will suffer from more external pressure. Therefore, they prefer to abandon the bonus of policies and related fund of the official units, bearing the risk of being banned as illegal organizations. As a result, many federations have the informality characteristic for their way of existence.

It is worth noticing that the departure attitude of the federations towards the official does not represent rejection. Most of the leaders of the federations can realize that the short-term benefits and long-term development of the federations are inseparable from the government and other official units. The inheritors will actively cooperate with the work of the official unit and the propaganda of the mainstream media. The operation scope of the federations includes activities organized by unofficial units like the development of particular combination of the research and study, the integration of culture and tourism, and the publicity of intangible cultural heritage on campus. It obviously reflects the positive attitude towards the cooperation. As it turns out, the federations have been doing its best to build as close relationships as possible with common benefit between official units, unofficial units and inheritors. For the leaders of each federation, only by considering multiple needs and regarding autonomy as the core can they win more opportunities and better promotion space for the inheritor groups.

3.3. The regional characteristics of the federations and the stability of its scale

No matter investigated from the external factors about activity scope and social influence, or from the internal factors about member composition and communication, the federations highlight characteristics of the regions. Regions here firstly refer to the provinces, cities and autonomous regions divided by the Chinese government. The activities of the federations are basically carried out in Henan with little cooperation across cities or other provinces. Therefore, the regional characteristic concentrates on the formation, development and activity space. Secondly, regions refer to the cultural areas partitioned by cultural attributes. The majority of the members in the federations are Henan natives, whose thoughts and behaviors are mostly nourished by the Central Plains culture. Therefore, the regional characteristics put particular emphasis on the cultural uniqueness of the approaches of activities, management mode and behaviors of the members in the federations.

Because of the influence of regional factors, the development scales of multiple federations in Henan appear strong stability. Judged by the number of the members, almost all the federations maintain a stable membership basis, and the number gradually increases in a positive way in the development stage. From the perspective of interpersonal relationships within the federations, the ties of relatively steady benefit and the social consensus about no interference avoid interpersonal conflicts in the federations. Although there are small-scale internal strife and disputes among certain members, each federation still keeps the overall harmony under the adjustment of the persons in charge. As for the external factors, each federation in Henan operates independently in a parallel way. Under the unified goal of maximizing interests, every federation keeps a safe distance from

each other, and maintains the stability of scale with an attitude of self-defense that is also regarded as the standard to restrict the behaviors of inner members.

4. Conclusion

Through the above discussion about why the HFIAIICH formed, the introduction to the outlook of its development, and the illustration about federations and the federation phenomenon, the public is able to reconsider the promotion pattern and practical experience of those federations, as well as explore the realistic value and long-term significance for the work related to the intangible cultural heritage in China through the integration of macroscopic analysis and microscopic observation.

The coexistence of the closed inheritance and the opening up for cooperation of intangible cultural heritage projects in Henan from the perspective of urban and rural areas. Under the vertical perspective of time, every intangible cultural heritage in China is handed down by traditional family inheritance or transmitting the knowledge by teachers. The skill mentors hold the dual attributes of a teacher and a father. In the closed inheritance pattern, the skill mentors and the inheritors have established a special relationship which is stable, lasting and close, taking the family as a unit. Therefore, compared with vocational training, the prolonged accumulation of practical teaching by mouth and heart makes the art level and the experience acquirement of intangible cultural heritage superior. From a horizontal social point of view, under the impact of urbanization and market economy, the traditional inheritance model has gradually exposed many disadvantages, such as closed communication, slow innovation and so on. The federations can carry out innovation and industrialization of intangible cultural heritage, related commercial activities and brand construction on the platform of market. Through the horizontal aggregation pattern, the federations promote inheritors to explore a collaborative development mode focused on commercial cooperation under the collective decision-making. Then the closed inheritance chain will be used to build a stereoscopic network together with the aim of mutual aid, grasping the balance between inheritance and development in both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

Analysis of the main tension in the process of innovation and industrialization of the intangible cultural heritage. In modern China, the process of urbanization has changed the overall survival outlook of intangible cultural heritage, and its main contradictions have also altered. A reexamination of the problems and experience is a necessity.

Firstly, the “Iceberg” exists under the incandescent propaganda of media. In recent years, intangible cultural heritage has gradually stepped into the public vision, but the propaganda work of mainstream media and public media is inevitably trapped in the form, which is lack of care for the inheritors as well as difficult to guarantee the publicity effect of work related to intangible cultural heritage. In this case, many federations carry out independent publicity by themselves through citizen journalism in the network platform, and achieve better results through accurate publicity. This means that the citizen journalism will shoulder more responsibilities and play a more important role of intangible cultural heritage in China in the future.

Secondly, the cultural industry in China is well developed, but the prospect of intangible cultural heritage is still not clear. Because of the lack of cultural context, many intangible cultural heritage related products are mostly regarded as implements in the market, and consumers also pay more attention to its practical value. The federations take the lead in investigating the market operation mode, in order to organize activities such as cultural festivals in which the inheritors can sale and exhibit the products, attaching great importance to cultural ecology in the business environment. The federations have an advantage over the sellers of similar commodities in modern network platforms in e-commerce, and promote mutual support between culture and trade.

Thirdly, problems of infringing intellectual property rights exist on the commercial market for Chinese intangible cultural heritage. This phenomenon is longstanding, especially in the prosperous cultural creativity market in recent years. The inheritors in the HFIAIICH make a timely response to this. They regulate individual behaviors through internal supervision, endeavoring to eliminate the illicit market phenomena caused by mutual plagiarism, copy for design and so on. Additionally, they make efforts to stimulate the promulgation of relevant policies, perfect the construction of the

system, and promote positive competition and development of the creativity market of intangible heritage culture. To realize the goals, they hire professional legal advisers by raising fund and appealing collectively to relevant departments.

The tendency of development of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. In the past 20 years, the work related to Chinese intangible cultural heritage has completed a significant transformation from rescue to protection, which symbolizes a remarkable achievement. The environment of new era, social reality and ecological field brings up new requirements towards the work of intangible cultural heritage. In this fallow period for seeking development, the policies and plans of the government and other offices should be paid more attention to, while the latest dynamic from the public should be sensitively captured. The development mode of federations shows that in the future, intangible cultural heritage will further consolidate the close relationship with commerce. Inheritor groups will achieve more cooperation in more communication. Cultural and creative industries will give significant impetus to the promotion of intangible cultural heritage, in order to reestablish the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and the public.

In conclusion, federations are social organizations composed of inheritors for self-service and self-management. They provide an opening platform for the development of intangible cultural heritage, becoming cocoons for breeding butterflies. Objectively speaking, the federations and federation phenomenon formed by Henan, China provide convenience for the inheritors of that region, expanding the social impact of intangible cultural heritage. Although further tests are needed in practice, they offer new ideas to the development of intangible cultural heritage, which deserves the attention and consideration.

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