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Analysis of the "Living Heritage" Transmission Path of Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region

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Abstract

In recent years, the rise of digital communication platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and short video platforms has transformed traditional media and diversified transmission channels. Relying on multimedia platforms and various offline folk activities, the transmission paths of the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County have expanded, achieving simultaneous online and offline transmission, as well as individual and collective transmission. This enables learners who are passionate about the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County to not only engage in self-learning through multimedia but also receive personal instruction from veteran artists. Additionally, due to Tekes County's unique natural landscapes and historical architecture, tourism in the area has flourished. Under the guidance of the local government, the region has successfully integrated the transmission of Mongolian Long Song with tourism, gradually establishing a unique "living heritage" transmission path for the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County.

Keywords: Tekes County, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region; Mongolian Long Song; "Living Heritage" Transmission Path

1. What is "Living Heritage"?

In China, the concept of "living heritage" was first proposed by Qi Qingfu (2009, p.3), who argued that "intergenerational transmission" is the essential characteristic of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The difference between intangible and tangible cultural heritage lies in its "living" nature. The primary goal of ICH protection is to ensure the continuation of its "living transmission," which serves as the basic criterion for assessing the rationality of ICH protection methods. Regardless of the protection method, as long as it contributes to the continuation of "living transmission," it is considered reasonable.

Following Qi Qingfu, Chinese scholars such as Li Aizhen and Wu Yuehua (2011), Zhou Yucheng (2015), and Wang Kaixuan (2020) have analyzed the "living transmission" and protection of musical ICH. They generally believe that "living transmission" of musical ICH should focus more on "protection" rather than "innovation." Specific methods include enhancing social education, increasing government support, accelerating talent cultivation, and establishing relevant protection responsibility mechanisms.

In my view, "living transmission" refers to the method of protecting and transmitting ICH within the "field" in which it is sustained, and within the everyday production and life of local people. It emphasizes the protection of the ecological space, sociocultural space, and the main subjects of ICH, while appropriately developing cultural industries to raise the awareness and enthusiasm of the community for transmission. It is a sustainable development path that insists on autonomous development through transmission, with "transmission" as the focus and "development" as the challenge.

From the perspective of "living transmission," I have found that the development path of "living transmission" for musical ICH aligns closely with the transmission and development of the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County in recent years, fully reflecting the characteristics of "living transmission." Therefore, analyzing the transmission and development of Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County as a typical case of "living transmission" can help redefine the concept of "living transmission" and further guide us in rethinking the challenges and difficulties of ICH transmission and development in the context of global musical culture.

2. How to Transmit? – Changes in the Transmission Methods of Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County

"We do not learn the Long Song for money; Mongolian blood runs through our veins, and the Long Song is our culture. As our parents pass away, fewer and fewer people in this world know how to sing the Long Song. When we pass away, the Long Song will disappear as well. Now we are singing, and our students are learning from us. After they master it, they will teach it to their children, and their children will teach it to their grandchildren. In this way, our culture will be passed down."

— Bu Donggerfu (Mongolian Long Song artist from Hujiertu Mongolian Township)

The primary motivation of Mongolian Long Song inheritors in Tekes County is to ensure that this precious cultural heritage created by their ancestors can be passed down through generations. Since 2017, they have initiated efforts to collect and preserve Long Song repertoires and transform transmission methods. These efforts have ultimately led to the establishment of a unique transmission and development path for the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County.

(1) Introduction of WeChat Transmission

"In 2017, Long Song groups in Zhaosu and Nileke had already been established, but there was none in Tekes. Teachers were teaching in other counties of Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, so I hoped Tekes could follow their example, and we also looked for teachers to create a WeChat group."

— Na Tohan (Mongolian Long Song artist from Huijiertu Mongolian Township)

According to local Long Song inheritor Na Tohan, the traditional transmission of Mongolian Long Song primarily relied on one-on-one master-apprentice transmission and family-based transmission through immersion. However, during a performance event in 2017, she discovered that other counties in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture were using WeChat groups to learn Long Songs. Inspired by this, she established Tekes County's first Mongolian Long Song transmission WeChat group, "Golden Song of Tekes." Although Tekes County was not the first to use WeChat for Long Song transmission, their WeChat group became the most active one. Since Na Tohan established the first group, Long Song artists from various townships and villages in Tekes County have followed suit, and mobile phones have become not only tools for staying in touch but also vital platforms for learning and transmitting the Long Song.

Currently, Tekes County has three major WeChat transmission groups: the Tekes County Long Song Transmission General Group – "Golden Song of Tekes"; the Karatohai Township WeChat Transmission Group – "Long Song"; and the Qilewuze Township WeChat Transmission Group – "Tianshan Group."

As of today, the Tekes County Long Song Transmission General Group, "Golden Song of Tekes," has 13 Long Song inheritors and over 200 students, with Na Tohan serving as the group leader. Group members range in age from 23 to 82, with teachers mastering more than 200 local Long Songs, and students mastering at least three Long Songs. This group brings together the main inheritors of Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County, and most of the Long Song students from the three townships are members.

The Karatohai Township WeChat Transmission Group, "Long Song," includes 23 Long Song inheritors and teachers who have mastered over 30 local Long Songs, with Ba Monkebair serving as the group leader. Notably, in addition to WeChat-based transmission, this township also conducts in-person collective teaching sessions with significant success. Currently, more than 300 of the township's 563 Mongolian residents have mastered the basics of Long Song, with ages ranging from 7 to over 70.

The Qilewuze Township WeChat Transmission Group, "Tianshan Group," currently has 19 students and one teacher (Wu Gan), with Ha Jumaguli serving as the group leader. The main participants in this group are aged between 47 and 66, and the local artists have mastered over 20 Long Songs. Wu Gan has already taught all 20 Long Songs to the students.

During the WeChat-based Long Song teaching process, the teacher first provides a demonstration of a Long Song in the group, and students can listen and learn according to their personal schedules, with the expectation that they master the song within 10-15 days. Once a student feels confident, they can submit their recording to the group for feedback, and the teacher provides corrections until the student fully masters the song.

When the student's performance receives approval from all teachers, they record a complete rendition of the Long Song and upload the audio to the "Hantengger" WeChat official account platform.

(2) Combined Transmission

In addition to the WeChat-based transmission, a combined transmission method for Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County has been explored since 2017 and officially gained traction in 2021. During field research, I discovered that there are three main folk music groups in Tekes County: the "Hope Ensemble" (Sawu'erden Dance Group), the "Golden Song of Tekes" Mongolian Long Song Group (Long Song), and the "Harmonious Melody of Tekes County" Ensemble (Jangar). Due to the overlap of inheritors and their status as multi-skilled individuals involved in the transmission of various arts, these three groups also contribute to the transmission of the Long Song.

The **"Hope Ensemble"** was organized in 2017 by Nu Xinka, who serves as the team leader. This group consists of 15 female artists from Doleken Village, Hujiertu Mongolian Township, all of whom are aged between 51 and 65. Fourteen of the 15 members are also part of the "Golden Song of Tekes" Mongolian Long Song Group. Their Long Song teacher, Duolihong, has mastered over 70 Long Songs from the Tekes County Shabinar area. Since 2017, Duolihong has taught 46 students through WeChat. In addition to WeChat transmission, the group emphasizes organized, collective offline transmission sessions as an important method of learning.

The **"Golden Song of Tekes" Mongolian Long Song Group** was initially established in 2017, with 60 members. Due to the limited number of collective performances, the group was disbanded. In 2021, it was reformed to participate in the *Cultural Runjiang: Jangar Intangible Cultural Heritage Theme Celebration and "Herdsmen Sing to the Communist Party"* series of activities. In April 2021, 40 artists were selected from the "Golden Song of Tekes" WeChat group by state-level Long Song inheritors Mo Nansen, Bu Donggerfu, and Na Tohan. The 40-member group made their debut in June 2021 during the *Herdsmen Sing to the Communist Party* series. Since then, the group has not disbanded after the event and continues to participate in various activities, aiming to bring Tekes County's Mongolian Long Song to a national stage.

The **"Harmonious Melody of Tekes County" Ensemble** was also formed to participate in the *Herdsmen Sing to the Communist Party* event, with Na Tohan serving as the leader. The ensemble consists of 22 members, all of whom are part of the "Golden Song of Tekes" Mongolian Long Song Group. Their primary focus is on the performance and transmission of the heroic epic *Jangar*.

In summary, the transmission and development path of the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County exhibits the characteristics of combining online and offline methods, as well as integrating individual and collective transmission. Local Long Song artists are

pursuing greater recognition of Mongolian culture through these combined transmission methods.

The ultimate goal of effective Long Song transmission is to foster its development, with the principle of developing through transmission and transmitting through development being a key aspect of the "living heritage" transmission path. Furthermore, the integration of the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County with its ecological space has increasingly opened up a new approach for cultural tourism fusion, with the merging of tourism and transmission fields becoming a novel direction for the "living heritage" transmission and development of the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County.

3. How to Develop? — The Introduction of Cultural Tourism

Integration

"The occasions for Long Song performances are numerous. In addition to weddings and festivals, artists are invited to participate in various activities, both large and small, in Tekes County. Our county advocates a theme each month and an event every week. Even during the past few years when large-scale events were impossible due to the pandemic, many village activities continued. Nowadays, during the peak tourist season from May to August, Long Song artists are also invited to perform. The government covers travel and meal expenses, but there is no additional remuneration, and the artists have never requested performance fees. Overall, most performers are elderly, as younger people need to attend school or work. All events in Tekes County are free to attend. Of course, if anyone is willing to pay for Long Song performances, we would immediately contact the artists."

— Cai Guixinhua (Head of Huijertu Mongolian Township)

From Cai Guixinhua's description, we can see that in recent years, Long Song performances have not only appeared in traditional settings such as weddings and festivals but are also combined with local thematic and tourism activities. In these events, the artists' performances have consistently received praise from the audience, further fostering cultural confidence, identity, and enthusiasm for transmission.

From Cai Guixinhua's comments, I also noticed some significant differences in the current performance and transmission of Long Song compared to the past. First, the functional use of Long Song performances has expanded. Second, the "field" for Long Song transmission has shifted. Traditionally, Long Song performances emphasized functions such as rituals, weddings, and education. Nowadays, Long Songs are frequently performed on stage as part of cultural shows.

The theory of "field" is one of the core concepts of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who posits that a field is the environment in which actors and their social positions operate. Each actor's position within the field results from the interaction between the

specific rules of the field, the actor's habitus, and their forms of capital (social, economic, and cultural) (Bourdieu, 1984).

The "field" of Mongolian Long Song transmission in Tekes County refers to the social network formed by the interactions of various participants involved in the transmission of Long Song. Traditionally, this field primarily included Long Song inheritors, local community residents, and government officials. However, in recent years, with the promotion of the cultural tourism integration concept, the transmission "field" of Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County has gradually merged with the "field" of tourism. This new field now comprises seven key participants: Long Song inheritors, government staff, media professionals, experts and scholars, local community residents, tourism companies and workers, and tourists. These seven elements form a social network that, much like a "mortise and tenon" structure, mutually influence and constrain each other, facilitating the integration of the Long Song transmission field with the tourism field in Tekes County.

The similarities and differences in the characteristics of Mongolian Long Songs in Tekes County can greatly stimulate the development of local cultural tourism integration. For instance, in performances, the shared characteristics of Long Songs across the three townships help tourists develop a basic understanding of Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County, while their differences provide a rich sensory experience for experts and scholars. Thus, the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County can leverage its similarities to promote a unified cultural image while using its differences to enrich the cultural diversity of the region.

From my first field research in Tekes County in 2021 to my second visit in 2023, the integration between tourism and transmission has deepened, and the cultural tourism integration work has expanded. To analyze the development of cultural tourism integration in Tekes County, I will use two examples from the "Harvest Festival" activities.

Every year at the end of September, Tekes County hosts a series of "Harvest Festival" events in the "Naan" Cultural Park, "Departure Street," and the central square, inviting Mongolian Long Song artists from the three townships to perform. At the 2021 Harvest Festival, Long Song artists from Hujertu Mongolian Township arrived in Tekes County around 9:30 a.m. for preparations. However, the performance was delayed due to the late arrival of media personnel, and during the wait, the artists performed three times for the arriving visitors. By 3:00 p.m., the artists became anxious due to the continued delays, and logistical support, such as providing drinking water, was lacking. The official performance finally began at 3:30 p.m., and the artists completed their performance by 4:00 p.m.

In contrast, at the 2023 Harvest Festival, the overall arrangements for rehearsals, transportation, and performance scheduling were more reasonable, and the promotion of the event had improved. The county no longer relied solely on local media but utilized

official news outlets such as the Tekes County Media Center, Ili News Network, Tencent, and Xinhua News, alongside new media platforms like Weibo and Douyin. These efforts resulted in comprehensive coverage of the festival, including agricultural product sales, cultural promotion, and performing arts.

With guidance from the publicity department, Tekes County also adopted live streaming to promote local agricultural products, partnering with seven government units, including the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Bureau and the Cultural Tourism Bureau, as well as platforms such as Litchi News and Kuaishou. This approach maximized exposure for Tekes County's agricultural products.

Additionally, improved planning helped ease the artists' anxiety over performance schedules, with dedicated personnel coordinating each performance and ensuring proper logistical support. This provided the artists with a strong sense of participation and respect.

However, from 2021 to the present, as all activities in Tekes County remain free to attend, performers still receive no direct payment for their performances, only reimbursement for travel and meal expenses. Despite the lack of direct financial compensation, increased media exposure has led to greater sales of agricultural products at local markets, transforming the previously underwhelming sales figures at the 2021 Harvest Festival.

In conclusion, as the integration of cultural tourism in Tekes County deepens, the coordination between various elements within the "field" has improved significantly. Pre-event promotion has boosted visitor numbers, benefiting local communities economically through increased sales of agricultural and craft products. Enhanced communication between local departments has also reduced time costs for the artists, while the positive reception of performances has enhanced Tekes County's cultural reputation. Post-performance media coverage has further sustained public interest in future events, helping to transform Tekes County's cultural and natural resources into economic assets and gradually strengthening the integration of the tourism and transmission fields for Mongolian Long Song.

From the perspective of the "living heritage" of Mongolian Long Song, the continuous efforts of local government and inheritors have elevated the social status of Long Song artists, who are highly valued. However, there is room to further strengthen the social and cultural space for Long Song transmission. For instance, Tekes County could establish a Mongolian Long Song Cultural Association and set up a Long Song Transmission Base to ensure a stable number of inheritors and maintain the continuity of the Long Song repertoire.

4. Conclusion

Leveraging the growth of tourism, Tekes County in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, has embarked on a path of deep cultural tourism integration, supported by its unique natural scenery and rich multi-ethnic intangible cultural heritage. Although many scholars argue that once an intangible cultural heritage item is placed on stage, its authenticity and functionality are compromised, I believe this view is somewhat biased.

As a musical intangible cultural heritage, the Mongolian Long Song of Tekes County inherently possesses a degree of entertainment and appreciation value. The primary reason for analyzing it as a representative of "living heritage" lies in the fact that, during its staging and integration with local performances, the other functions of the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County have not been altered—only its aesthetic appreciation has been enhanced. This should be viewed as an expansion of its functionality, rather than a destruction of it.

In this process, the Mongolian Long Song inheritors of Tekes County have gained recognition from government officials, tourists, and local community residents, which has significantly elevated their social status. This, in turn, has further stimulated their enthusiasm for transmission and attracted attention from people across various sectors to this intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, I believe that the "living heritage" transmission path of the Mongolian Long Song in Tekes County has been effectively realized, and the cultural tourism integration approach has been successfully implemented. This is a model that other cities in China could learn from and emulate.

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