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## Preserving Tacit Knowledge in Miao Jiali: Challenges and Solutions

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### Abstract

As a distinctive form of oral culture, the Miao people's Jiali embodies a wealth of local knowledge, including social, cultural, and historical dimensions. In addition to explicit knowledge, Jiali comprises a substantial reservoir of tacit knowledge, which is acquired through the master-apprentice inheritance process and practical activities. This tacit knowledge is the core of the cultural essence of Jiali. Such tacit knowledge is evident in the adaptability of rituals' performance and the survival wisdom embedded in the Miao culture. It is transmitted through bodily experience, contextualized practices, and individual intuitive perceptions. However, the inheritance of Jiali's tacit knowledge is confronted with notable challenges due to modernization. The traditional ritual settings in which this knowledge is transmitted are gradually being superseded by modern education and commercialized activities. Through ethnographic fieldwork in Miao communities, this study combines participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with Jiali masters and community members. Data collection also involved documenting rituals and analyzing Jiali texts. The findings highlight the characteristics of tacit knowledge within Jiali and the challenges to its inheritance. Based on these findings, this study further proposes strategies for inheritance, ensuring its vitality and continuity in contemporary society. These include reevaluating traditional culture, enhancing the status of Jiali masters, and reconstructing cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** *Miao's Jiali, Tacit knowledge, Inheritance challenges, Optimisation strategies*

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## 1. Introduction

The Miao people, distinguished by their rich and diverse cultural heritage, have historically depended on oral traditions to preserve and transmit their local knowledge. Among these traditions, Jiali is notable for its multifaceted and symbolic nature, serving both educational and social functions within the Miao community. Jiali encompasses a broad range of knowledge, including philosophy and the natural sciences. It also plays a vital role in maintaining social order and preserving cultural identity. However, the rapid development of modernization has posed significant challenges to the transmission of Jiali, including a decline in both the number of teachers and learners of this tradition. Furthermore, global trends toward cultural uniformity risk undermining the diversity inherent in ethnic and regional traditions. As some scholars argue, cultural diversity

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at these levels is a fundamental prerequisite for integration at the global level (László, 2004). This highlights the dual urgency of preserving Jiali, both as a cornerstone of Miao society and as a vital expression of human cultural diversity.

## 2. Research Objectives and Questions

In light of these challenges, this study aims to examine the transmission of Jiali, focusing on its tacit knowledge, the obstacles it faces in modern contexts, and strategies for its preservation. The specific research questions are as follows: 1. What constitutes the tacit knowledge within Jiali? 2. How do modernization and societal changes impact the inheritance of Jiali's tacit knowledge? 3. What strategies can ensure the sustainable preservation of Jiali as a form of cultural heritage?

## 3. Methodology and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the tacit knowledge embedded in Jiali, thereby highlighting its contextual and dynamic nature within the Miao community. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is a situated activity that interprets the world through practices such as field notes, interviews, and recordings. This interpretive approach is well-suited to Jiali, a tradition that is deeply interwoven with the Miao people's cultural and social realities. This facilitates an in-depth exploration of the transmission and adaptation of tacit knowledge in the face of modernization.

To achieve this, this study utilizes ethnographic methods to investigate Jiali in its natural settings. A range of specific methods were employed, including participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations. Participatory observation entailed active engagement in rituals, training, and cultural events, thereby facilitating direct insight into the operation of tacit knowledge. Semi-structured interviews with Jiali masters, apprentices, and community members explored key themes while allowing participants to share personal perspectives. Informal interviews conducted during casual interactions served to supplement these methods, capturing spontaneous insights that are often overlooked by formal approaches.

## 4. Data Analysis and Findings

The data for this study were collected during two agricultural cycles through ethnographic fieldwork in Miao communities, providing a comprehensive perspective on the seasonal and contextual dimensions of Jiali's inheritance. This paper applied thematic analysis to uncover patterns related to the characteristics, challenges, and preservation of tacit knowledge. Extended fieldwork provided opportunities to observe Jiali in a variety of settings. These included rituals, training sessions, and informal community interactions. Such observations helped reveal how explicit and tacit knowledge interact in practice. Three key findings include:

1. The characteristics of tacit knowledge in Jiali; 2. challenges for inheritance; and 3. strategies for preservation. These findings will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections of this paper.

## 5. The Value and Knowledge Characteristics of Jiali

### 5.1. Jiali and its Social Educational Functions

The term “?” (Jia) is a transliteration of the dialect's “Jax”, while “?” (Li) corresponds to “Lis” in the Miao language (Fan, 2020). In Mandarin, Jiali is a combination of transliteration and semantic translation, encompassing meanings such as speaking, discussing, debating, and reasoning. Jiali serves as a general term for Miao's oral poetic forms and a descriptor for individual works of this kind. The text covers multiple sections that are, in themselves, relatively independent yet are also intrinsically connected. The extensive content covers a wide range of subjects, including philosophy, history, literature, folklore, law, and natural sciences. Therefore, it has been described as the “encyclopedia” and “code” of Miao (Wang, 2015).

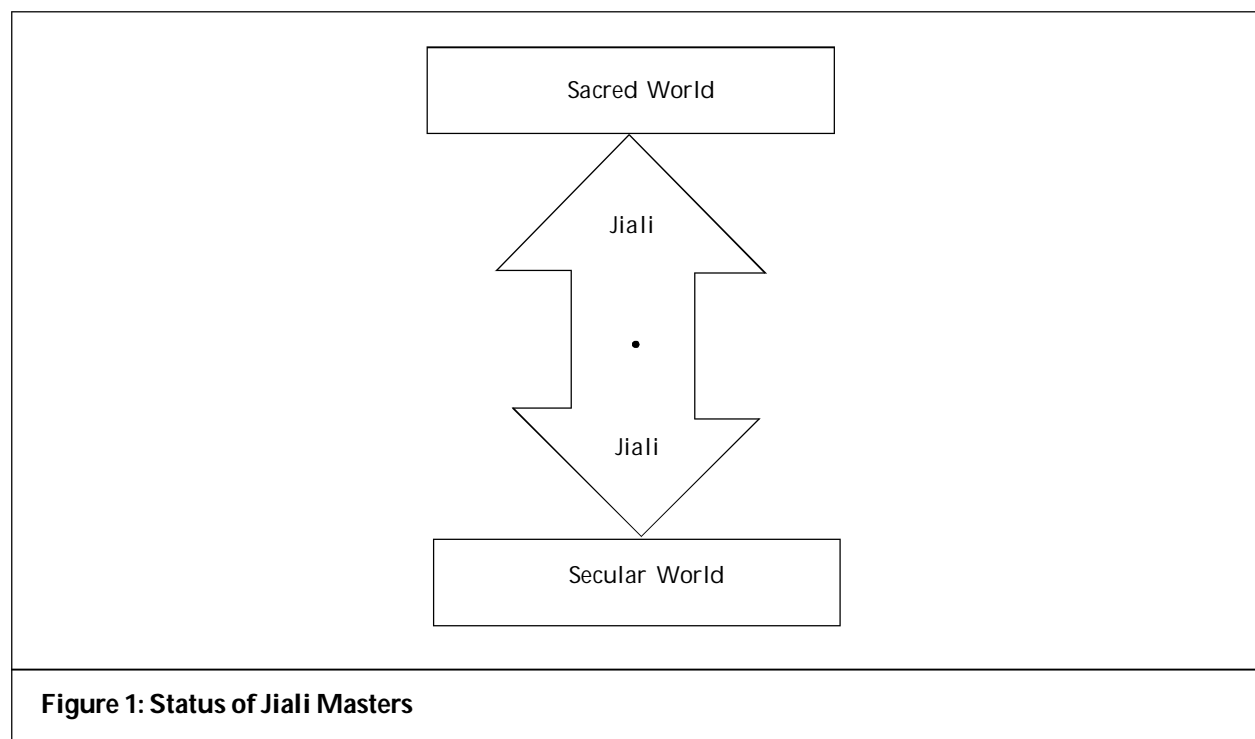
#### 5.1.1. The Social Function of Jiali: A Symbol of Authority and a Means of Social Order

Steward, the American anthropologist, defined “cultural core” as “the constellation of features which are most closely related to subsistence activities and economic arrangements. The core includes such social, political, and religious patterns as are empirically determined to be closely connected with these arrangements” (Steward, 1955). In this framework, the cultural core comprises elements that are closely associated with

subsistence. As a vital component of Miao culture, Jiali has a multifaceted significance, encompassing material life and spiritual beliefs. It can be regarded as the cultural core of the Miao people. As Cassirer (2021) observed, man is a symbolic animal. We create symbols and are also shaped by them. The Miao people created Jiali as a symbolic system, and in turn, Jiali has shaped the cultural identity and practices of the Miao people.

In traditional Miao society, the Jiali master (or Jiashi in Mandarin) played a central role in dispute resolution (Liu and Jiang, 2022). They utilized Jiali to mediate conflicts and maintain social order. As a form of local knowledge, Jiali permeates every aspect of Miao society, addressing issues such as marriage, land, and family relations. With no modern legal framework, Jiali provided legitimacy and authority, enabling the governance of traditional Miao society with reliance on external coercion. Instead, social harmony was achieved through the wisdom and prestige of Jiali masters.

Durkheim proposed a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular world (Durkheim, 2011). As "judges", the Jiali masters fulfill a distinctive and authoritative role, acting as a bridge between the two realms. Their dual role in secular governance and ritual education reinforces the social order and sustains harmony within the community. This culturally, spiritually, and ritually sustained order highlights the centrality of Jiali in Miao culture (Figure 1). Through such governance and education, Jiali ensured the continuity and stability of Miao society and its internal social structures.



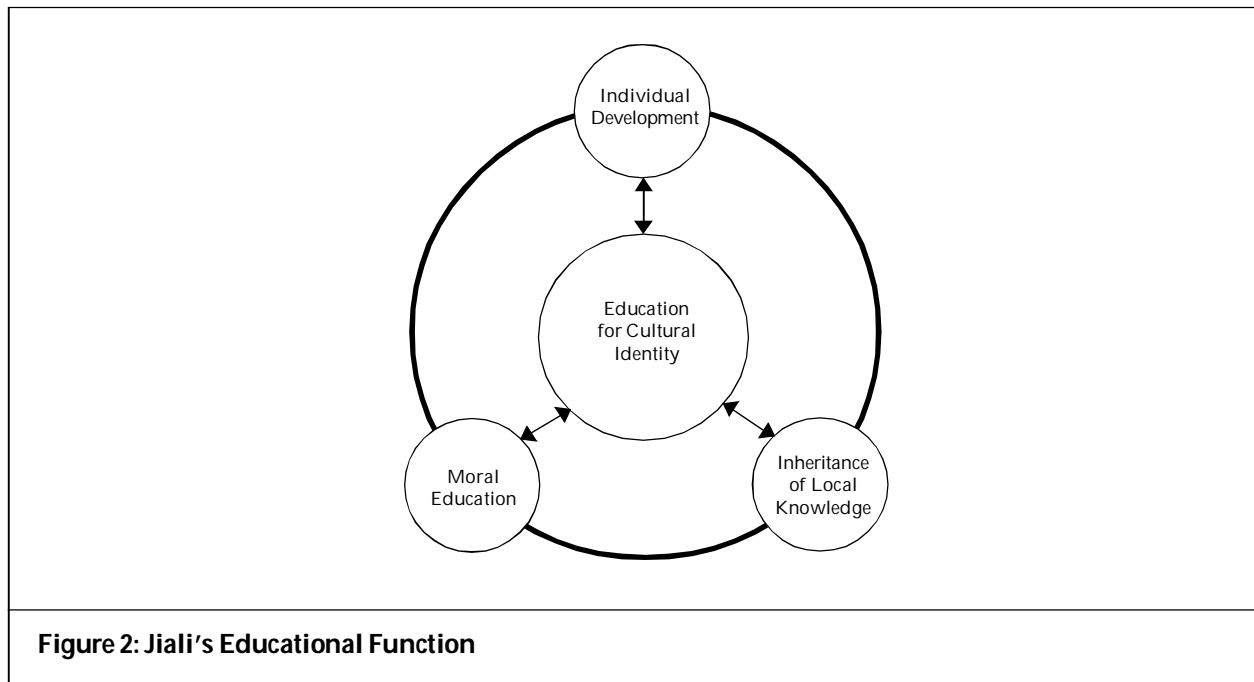
### 5.1.2. The Educational Function of Jiali: Promoting Individual Development

Jiali plays a pivotal role in the Miao culture while also functioning as a crucial carrier for education in Miao society (Gong and Zhang, 2021). From the educational perspective, Jiali fosters cultural identity, moral development, and intellectual growth in individuals, exerting a profound influence.

Firstly, the transmission of Jiali is not merely a matter of transferring knowledge. This process entails acquiring social norms, ethical values, and cultural identity. Through the oral teachings from Jiali masters, apprentices learn the fundamental texts of Jiali and absorb the Miao's worldview and values. Jiali, through rituals, stories, and debates, instructs apprentices in the resolution of ethical issues in daily life, including those about family relations, marital disputes, and coexistence with nature. To illustrate, in the context of family mediation, Jiali masters employ traditional phrases to facilitate the rational thinking of disputants, emphasizing the importance of reconciliation and humility. This process assists individuals in developing appropriate values and behavioral models.

Secondly, the educational function of Jiali can be observed in its subtle influence on people. By engaging in rituals and listening to Jiali discourses, the transmission of Jiali becomes integrated into the everyday behaviors and thought patterns of the Miao people. Each act of recitation and instruction is a means of knowledge transmission as well as a vehicle for shaping the individual's inner self, fostering a sense of social responsibility, cultural identity, and a profound

understanding of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the function of Jiali is not merely the transfer of knowledge; instead, it is the construction of moral perspectives and cultural identities through the practice of culture (Figure 2).



## 5.2. The Local Knowledge Characteristics of Jiali

In the context of the post-industrial era, local knowledge and postmodernism coexist. This phenomenon emerges as a response to Western culture's dominance and globalization's strike on cultural diversity. Against the backdrop, "local knowledge" has been proposed to counter the effects of modernization and universal culture. It is seen as a way of honoring the unique wisdom of local communities in their relationship with the natural world and with one another. Clifford Geertz, in his discussion of "local knowledge," emphasized that this form of knowledge is not limited by geographical, temporal, or social boundaries, but is instead characterized by its distinctive tone (Geertz, 2014). This imbues facts with a vernacular and culturally specific quality, integrating them into the norms and values of a specific locality. If "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun" (Geertz, 1973), local knowledge becomes a crucial lens through which to comprehend the web. Culture, as a product of the interaction between humans and their environment, reflects the distinctive lifestyles and group characteristics developed by cultural communities with their unique living context.

Thus, the acquisition of local knowledge presents a pivotal aspect of the socialization process. In communities that lack written words, oral transmission represents the primary means of cultural inheritance. This process typically aligns with the geographic boundaries of the cultural community. Cultural content unique to an ethnic group-- such as its origins, history, production techniques, and interpersonal relationships is stored and passed down through oral means, serving as the foundation for becoming an elite within the community.

## 5.3 Jiali's Tacit Knowledge

Knowledge intrinsically exhibits multi-layer complexity (Bratianu and Bejinaru, 2023). As a form of knowledge, Jiali exemplified this complex internal structure. In particular, Jiali comprises both the "signified" (linguistic symbols such as the ceremonial verses chanted by Jiali masters and the text compiled by experts) and the "signifier" (the cultural imagery internalized by members of the Miao community during the learning, inheritance, and application of Jiali). These cultural images, which vary according to individual and context, are further enhanced and expanded through the generational practice of Jiali masters. During this process, Jiali masters incorporate personal insights and respond to contemporary needs, resulting in evolving interpretations and meanings of Jiali across historical periods. Tacit knowledge constitutes a substantial element of Jiali, situated at the core of its inheritance practices. The term "tacit" has its etymological roots in

Middle French or Latin, where it was historically referred to as “silent” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Over time, it has evolved to mean “understood without being expressed directly” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Michael Polanyi first presented the concept of “tacit knowledge” in a systematic manner. He further elaborated on this concept in the *Study of Man* (1958), where he categorized knowledge into two types and provided a clear definition of tacit knowledge:

“What is usually described as knowledge, as set out in written words or maps, or mathematical formulae, is only one kind of knowledge; while unformulated knowledge, such as we have of something we are in the act of doing, is another form of knowledge. If we call the first kind explicit knowledge, and the second, tacit knowledge, we may say that we always know tacitly that we are holding our explicit knowledge to be true” (Polanyi, 1958, p. 12).

Tacit knowledge stems from Democritus’s concepts of “obscure knowledge” and “genuine knowledge”. He believed that the mind, through engagement with perceptible objects, could grasp the inherent reality within those objects (Michalos et al., 2023). Tacit knowledge captures a third space in the enduring philosophical tension between reason and sensation. This concept emphasizes the presence of unspeakable knowledge— a form of cognition that transcends verbal articulation or systematic explanation. Even in natural scientific research, breakthroughs often cannot rely solely on the rational systems to chart the path forward (Polanyi, 1983). In contrast, these processes usually depend on tacit knowledge—what we commonly call “inspiration” or “institution”. Rooted in experiential practice, tacit knowledge plays a pivotal role in scientific improvement (Kucharska and Erickson, 2023; Senker, 2008), providing an indescribable yet essential foundation for the emergence of explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge operates like the submerged part of an iceberg: unseen but fundamental to supporting the visible, explicit portion. In other words, it is an indispensable prerequisite for the generation of explicit knowledge. It enables intuitive and creative leaps.

Tacit knowledge extends into postmodernism, which rejects the dichotomies of inner versus outer and mind versus matter. Instead, it emphasizes the non-dual nature of knowledge and posits that knowledge is not wholly explicit or external, but rather deeply embedded in live experience. This knowledge is generated through hands-on experience (Yu, 2007), contextualized practice (van Houten, 2023), and perceptual processes. This perspective resonates with ideas in Chinese philosophy, such as “the Dao is never far from people” (Zi, 2016)<sup>1</sup> and “the Dao is hidden and nameless” (Lao, 2012). These insights highlight the dynamic interplay between implicit and explicit dimensions of knowledge creation.

Explicit and tacit knowledge in Jiali are mutually reinforcing, with all explicit knowledge having its roots in tacit understanding (Li, 2009). For example, the principles and wisdom embedded in Jiali texts and rituals are tacit, but can now be accessed through forms such as written texts, recitations and visual presentations.

The tacit knowledge that is not manifest within Jiali can be classified into three categories (Zhang, 2002): 1. Normative tacit knowledge, which has the potential to become explicit. 2. Contingent tacit knowledge that may or may not manifest depending on specific contexts. This knowledge is often hidden due to its individualistic nature; 3. Negative tacit knowledge that is unlikely or unnecessary to manifest remains implicit over time. The wisdom of Jiali masters, particularly the characteristics that make them become who they are, i.e. the qualities that define a Jiali master. Their ability to navigate situations, adapt on the spot, and apply Jiali in practice can only partially be transmitted through language. Nevertheless, these capabilities profoundly influence the transmission of Jiali culture, thereby demonstrating how tacit knowledge underpins explicit knowledge and ensures cultural continuity.

The generation of tacit knowledge is inseparable from the accumulation of individual practical experience (Fang, 2004). In the transmission of Jiali, the role of Jiali masters is twofold: they act as the conveyors as well as the creators of tacit knowledge. Over different historical periods, Jiali masters amassed a substantial fund of tacit knowledge through their pedagogical and practical application of Jiali. This knowledge is reflective of their lived experiences and the societal changes they navigate. For example, contemporary Jiali texts tend to place greater emphasis on education and degree. This trend reflects the dynamic process of cultural adaptation through the evolution of Jiali’s explicit knowledge.

However, it can be seen that the genuine tacit knowledge of Jiali masters extends considerably beyond what is made explicit. The flexibility with which they handle complex situations, the subtle and unspoken interactions with their apprentices, and the inexpressible cultural wisdom form the deep core of Jiali culture. Even if an apprentice can demonstrate proficiency in the explicit Jiali texts, it is not consequent for them to become a Jiali master. It is only when an individual has acquired an understanding of the tacit knowledge inherent to the tradition that this can occur (Yao, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> Dao (道) means the way of nature or the ways things reliably have happened and will happen. It is a fundamental concept in Chinese philosophy.



Consequently, Jiali cannot be reduced to a mere set of customary laws; rather, it represents an entire “way of life.” It encapsulates the wisdom of managing complex human relationships, as well as relationships between nature and society. It demonstrates the profound depth of Miao culture. The explicit and tacit dimensions of Jiali are mutually reinforcing. To grasp the cultural essence of Jiali, it is necessary to go beyond the text and delve into its tacit knowledge. Through ritual practices, cultural reconstructing, and the continual accumulation and renewal of individual experiences, Jiali reveals the richness of Miao culture, offering a distinctive path for cultural transmission that transcends mere explicit knowledge.

## 6. The Present Situation of Jiali Inheritance

Tacit knowledge has an adhesive nature: it does not exist in isolation but is attached to explicit knowledge, together forming the holistic body of cultural knowledge (Fang, 2004). In the cultural activity of Jiali, explicit knowledge can be expressed through the textual documentation and public presentation of Jiali texts. Conversely, tacit knowledge is manifested as the implicit experiences accumulated by Jiali masters during instruction and practice. Such elements include the tonalities and rhythms of rituals, as well as the underlying living wisdom. The integration of explicit and tacit knowledge renders Jiali a vital component of Miao culture. Therefore, it is necessary to address the inheritance of tacit knowledge in Jiali within the broader context of its cultural activities.

Passing on Jiali is currently facing severe challenges in the present day. According to the oral histories and field research, this study finds that the inheritance of Jiali has declined significantly since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when “everyone learns Jiali” (人人学贾理). In some districts, there is even a “master has no disciple” (有师无承) facing a lacking successor crisis. This phenomenon is mainly attributed to the rural exodus and the impact of modern lifestyles. The cultural context for passing on Jiali has been weakened by the massive migration of young people to urban areas for work. Moreover, as with epic poetry, the audience’s participation is crucial to the inheritance in such oral culture. In Jiali rituals, however, the master’s chanting often becomes a “show with no audience”. The lack of resonance and interaction from audiences undermines Jiali’s vitality.

Combining history and the present situation, it is evident that the inheritance of Jiali can be divided into two stages: inheritance in the traditional context and the inheritance in the “ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage)+traditional” context. The traditional stage mainly relies on 1. rituals, 2. classes taught by Jiali masters, and 3. family inheritance, while in the contemporary period, the inheritance of Jiali is gradually being integrated into modern approaches, such as 4. school education and 5. tourism performances. In this chapter, these five main approaches will be analyzed.

### 6.1. Five Main Methods of Jiali Inheritance

#### 6.1.1. Inheritance through Rituals

Jiali is not solely concerned with the governance of interpersonal relationships in secular life; it also encompasses the mediation between humans and deities. Although the modern judicial system has reduced the need to resolve social disputes through Jiali, individuals facing the interface of tradition and modernity frequently espouse a dual belief system. They accept scientific knowledge while simultaneously adhering to ancestral customs. Consequently, the practice of Jiali rituals remains a vibrant and enduring aspect of traditional Chinese culture.

Field research has revealed that despite possessing a valid driving license and being legally qualified to drive, a young man still sought the assistance of LYC, a Jiali master, to perform the “Ding La·Che” ritual for his new car, invoking the protection of Ding La<sup>2</sup>, the god of crafts in Miao culture. Upon inquiry, he elucidated, “Possessing a driver’s license does not calm my concerns.” “With Ding La’s blessing, I feel much safer driving.” This belief-driven behavior shares similarities with modern psychological counseling, albeit expressed through a different discursive system.

The Miao Household Protection Ritual provides a further illustrative example (Figures 3 and 4), with a particular concentration around the time of family reunions during the Spring Festival. In a single day, the author was present at three such rituals, thereby underscoring the unquestionable importance of these practices within the Miao community in the context of modern society.

2 Ding La is the Miao God of craftsmanship. Interestingly, LYC explained that Ding La is the same as Confucius in Chinese, which explains why some Miao people enshrine plaques dedicated to Confucius.



**Figure 3: Miao Household Protection Ritual**



**Figure 4: Protective "Magical Artifact" Hung on the Main Door (Miao Ethnic Ritual Object)**

### 6.1.2 Jiali Master's Teaching Classes

The teaching classes conducted by Jiali Masters (Figures 5 and 6) exemplify a conventional pedagogy mode, resembling the private school system. Historically, the collective enthusiasm for these classes not only satisfied the younger generation's desire for cultural learning but also reinforced the role of Jiali within the community.



**Figure 5: Jiali Master PYX Teaching Jiali**



**Figure 6: Jiali Ceremonial Stick Required for Jiali Teaching**

However, with the rise of labor migration, the modern apprenticeship system's scale and frequency have significantly declined. Following the designation of Jiali as a national-level ICH, the transmission of its traditions has received considerable attention from the government. Consequently, each instance of a Jiali master conducting a teaching class has been documented. The following (Table 1) is an excerpt from the records of classes conducted by Jiali masters:

In general, the scale and frequency of collective Jiali teaching sessions have diminished in comparison to their prominence in the past. These sessions are primarily preserved within six officially recognized transmission centers under the Qiandongnan Cultural Bureau. These centers typically hold classes during the Spring Festival, although exceptions may arise due to external factors such as pandemics or major community events like weddings and funerals. During the field research, the author was allowed to observe several Jiali teaching events. On one occasion, while accompanying Jiali master LHT to a Miao song competition, we met his nephew, who is also his apprentice. Following the dinner, the group made an impromptu decision to undertake a brief session of Jiali learning. Although this session did not occur in an official transmission center, it illustrates how traditional knowledge can be seamlessly integrated into modern life.

**Table 1: Record of Jiali Master's Classes (Partial)**

Jiali	Master Level of Inheritor	Location	Number of Students	Number of Sessions
LHT	National	Xiaopai Jia Village, Yangwu Town	7	10
WQR	Provincial	Chahe Village, Paidiao Town	14	10
PYX	Provincial	Taichen Village, Xingren Town	13	7
LYC	Prefectural	Yangsong Village, Yangwu Town	7	4

### 6.1.3. Family Inheritance

The term “familial Inheritance” is used to describe the inheritance of knowledge and practices through kinship ties. Family profoundly influences the development of every individual—many Jiali masters hail from the family of Jiali, with WQR and LHT being notable examples. The transfer of knowledge through family ties offers distinctive benefits that other forms do not have. Firstly, children who are immersed in a situation learning environment from an early age gain a deeper understanding of Jiali through unique embodied experiences. Secondly, the flexibility of family settings in terms of time and location facilitates the seamless integration of Jiali instruction into everyday life. Even daily scenarios serve as potential opportunities for the inheritance of this knowledge.

However, family inheritance encounters considerable obstacles in the context of contemporary society. The migration of younger individuals for work reduces the time spent residing with older family members, undermining the conventional parent-child learning environment. Nevertheless, the spread of smartphones has partially compensated for this shortcoming. Some Jiali masters record Jiali texts in video or audio formats, which allows family members to study at their convenience. This innovative application of modern technology has opened new avenues for familial transmission.

During the field research, the author had the opportunity to discuss a wedding Jiali ritual hosted by LHT. During our conversation, his son suddenly realized that he had yet to learn a particular exert of Jiali texts. Without hesitation, he used his phone to record his father reciting the texts from start to finish, ensuring that they could be studied at a later point in time. During the field research, the author also discovered that LHT's wife was proficient in Jiali, as her father and uncle were both Jiali masters. This case exemplifies the strength of transmission within the context of multigenerational Jiali families.

From the case of LHT, it is evident that family inheritance of Jiali often generates a “snowball effect”, where families with Jiali traditions tend to form marital ties with other families with similar backgrounds, further reinforcing intergenerational inheritance. Nevertheless, this phenomenon may be undergoing a period of decline in the present era. The extent to which this will weaken remains an open question, and further longitudinal fieldwork is required to reach more definitive conclusions.

### 6.1.4. Incorporating Jiali into School Education

Education in ethnic minority regions often exhibits a dual character, combining adherence to the national curriculum with integration of the distinctive features of the local culture (Wang, 1999). In recent years, initiatives such as the “Incorporating Jiali into Schools” project have provided innovative approaches for the modern transmission of Jiali. In addition to being integrated into the school culture establishment (Figure 7), Jiali has also been introduced into the class. To illustrate, since 2016, a primary school in Danzhai has offered a local curriculum centered on Jiali, implementing a “three-in-one” teaching model. With the guidance of teacher WX, the Jia Li culture has been transformed into a practical educational resource.

Initially, extracts from Jiali with positive and inspiring themes are incorporated into Chinese language classes, accompanied by activities such as Jiali teaching competitions, recitation contests, and essay competitions. Secondly,



**Figure 7: Jiali Exhibition Panel Next to the School Corridor<sup>3</sup>**



**Figure 8: Worshipping Ancestors Ritual at Wanda Town**

<sup>3</sup> The letters are in the Miao script, and below them is the Mandarin translation. The contents are: “With ski, there is land; with the nation, there is home” and “Children depend on their parents, and the people depend on the country”.



the school curriculum has incorporated a local-based textbook entitled *Introduction to Jiali*. Thirdly, Jiali has been integrated into students' moral education, with an emphasis on the perseverance and resilience of Miao ancestors.

In the classroom observations, the author observed a teacher employing the Jiali text *The Creation of Heaven and Earth* to prompt philosophical thinking about human origins among students. Such integration serves to enhance students' comprehension of Miao culture while simultaneously reinforcing their cultural identity.

Meanwhile, it provides a conduit for the transmission of Jiali within the educational sphere, offering a promising model for its preservation and adaptation in contemporary society.

#### 6.1.5. *Tourism Performance*

As a deeply impoverished county at the national level, Danzhai experienced a historic turning point in its economic development when Wanda Group signed an agreement to provide targeted support to the county in December 2014 (Duan et al., 2022). With tourism poverty alleviation as the core strategy, the agreement aimed to drive Danzhai's development. The previously isolated natural environment, which fostered the rich and diverse sub-ethnic cultures of the Miao people, has now become a new asset for economic progress. The Wanda Group has implemented measures such as building Wanda Town - a cultural center that integrates Miao and Dong cultural elements - improving the appearance of the village and promoting rural tourism. As of 25 February 2024, Wanda Town has received a total of over 20 million visitors (Baidu, 2024).

Field research revealed that the worshipping ancestors (祭尤) ritual at Wanda Town (Figure 8) retains formal fidelity to traditional practices, from texts to ceremonial procedures. MacCannell's (1976) concept of "staged authenticity" aptly captures the broader performance strategy, in which most rituals are condensed into five-minute spectacles labelled as "ancient Miao culture". For instance, Jiali masters wore traditional attires that symbolized historical aesthetics but diverge from contemporary Miao attire. This selective reconstruction aligns with MacCannell's observation that tourism often creates a "front stage" (ritual performances) catering to tourist' expectations, while the "back stage" (authentic cultural practices) remains hidden.

In conclusion, the incorporation of tourism performances has facilitated the transmission of Jiali culture, thereby enhancing its preservation. On the one hand, such performances provide economic support to Jia masters and cultural inheritors, thereby ensuring their livelihoods. On the other hand, they have drawn wider attention to Jia Li. However, rituals are often adapted to meet tourist expectations. For example, ceremonies may be shortened, or traditional attire may be modified. These changes can inadvertently alter the original form of the ritual. This raises concerns about how to balance cultural preservation with economic viability. This tension between preserving traditional culture and navigating commercialized settings raises new challenges and calls for thoughtful consideration regarding the future of Jiali transmission.

## 6.2. *Characteristics of the Inheritance of Jiali*

### 6.2.1. *Oral Inheritance*

The inheritance of Jiali is primarily dependent on the traditional method of oral transmission, which plays a dominant role in the cultural inheritance of non-literate ethnic groups. This form of inheritance can be categorized into two types: 1. social transmission, which involves the spontaneous oral distribution of myths and legends within a community; and 2. interpersonal transmission, which occurs through direct oral teaching within parent-child or master apprentice relationships. The latter, exemplified by Jiali, follows a relatively fixed system of inheritance that requires a higher level of professional competence from the masters.

Miao's writing system was constructed in 1956 (Huang and Pan, 2023), and scholars have since documented Jiali texts using this system. However, literacy has yet to become the predominant mode of Jiali inheritance. The unpopularity of literacy is because memorizing Jiali texts is just a prerequisite; the capacity to utilize them flexibly within ritual contexts remains a fundamental requirement. In essence, the successful mastery of this field is contingent upon the acquisition of the tacit knowledge conveyed by the Jiali masters.

Consequently, the inheritance of Jiali today still depends on the oral and experiential exchanges between master and apprentice. Jiali masters adjust the interpretation of Jiali texts and rituals according to their understanding, and learners develop an individualized comprehension of Jia Li. This dynamic process explains the nuanced regional variations in Jiali practices.

### 6.2.2. *Living in the Rich Daily Life of the Miao People*

The cultural inheritance of Jiali is an integral aspect of the daily lives of the Miao people. The major life events of birth, aging, illness, death, marriage, and migration are all guided by Jiali. A significant proportion of Miao elders perceive Jiali to be the philosophical foundation of their way of life. Despite the impact of modernization that has resulted in the confinement of numerous cultural symbols to museums or their transformation into staged performances, the cultural vitality of Jiali continues to flourish in its original context.

The results of field research indicate that the Jiali performances at Wanda Town in Danzhai are not merely cultural exhibitions; instead, they represent a reproduction of authentic rituals. The content of the recitations by the Jiali masters, the design of the ritual process, and the attire of the participants are all directly derived from authentic ritual practices. Even though these performances are designed to meet the cultural expectations of tourists, their fundamental essence remains inextricably linked to the rituals that form an integral part of Miao's life.

### 6.2.3. *Self-Adjustment in Response to the Social Development*

Traditional culture does not remain static in the process of modernization; instead, it displays a notable capacity to undergo processes of adaptation and self-adjustment. A vital culture is capable of undergoing active structural adjustments in response to the diverse needs of modern society within a dynamic social environment. The inheritance of Jiali provides a clear illustration of this characteristic. The results of field research indicate that the content of Jiali has been modified following lifestyle changes. For example, within the context of a traditionally agrarian society, Jiali placed significant emphasis on rituals about agriculture, such as the fields and the planting of crops. These rituals served not only a practical function in guiding agricultural activities but also conveyed a concept of harmony between humans and nature through prayer.

However, with the transition to a modern society, formal education has become dominant, and the pursuit of academic achievement has increasingly become a significant objective for the Miao people. Consequently, the number of rituals associated with agriculture has diminished, while those about academic success have increased.

This shift is particularly evident in the "Invocation for Entrance to School", a Jiali text that states: "May you be invited into higher learning, cross the gate of the Peking University, study abroad, and know the 'Engeleshi'<sup>4</sup> ..." These words not only express respect for knowledge but also demonstrate the capacity of Jiali to adapt its content in response to changing circumstances. By incorporating new societal demands, Jiali has not only preserved its cultural core but also enhanced its spiritual connotations. This capacity for adaptation enables Jiali to retain its vitality within the context of modern society.

## 7. Challenges of Inheriting the Tacit Knowledge in Jiali

The transmission of Jiali's tacit knowledge faces dual challenges from internal motivation and external conditions. Social changes brought about by modernization have created significant challenges for the inheritance of Jiali. In light of field research and empirical data, the difficulties of inheriting the tacit knowledge of Jiali can be examined from two distinct perspectives: the diminishing of internal motivation and the constraints imposed by external conditions.

### 7.1 *Insufficient Internal Motivation*

#### 7.1.1 *The Debasement of the Status of Jiali Masters*

In traditional Miao society, a Jiali master was regarded as a "spiritual leader" and local community governor. However, with the advancement of urbanization, the improvement of the modern legal system, and the widespread adoption of institutionalized education, the role of Jiali masters has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from that of a leader to that of an ordinary individual. The results of field research indicate a significant decline in the status of Jiali masters within Miao society, which has directly resulted in a reduction in the younger generation's willingness to learn Jiali and pursue the role of Jiali masters themselves. Although Jiali masters are still required to preside over rituals, their symbolic cultural significance has been significantly diminished.

<sup>4</sup> The transliteration of "English".

### 7.1.2 *The Absence of Commodity Exchange Value in Jiali*

In comparison to other ICH, such as Miao embroidery and batik, Jiali, as a spiritual form of oral culture, is challenging to transform into a commodity with economic value. Given its intangible nature as an oral tradition, it is not possible to disseminate or exchange this form of cultural heritage in the form of a physical product. Furthermore, the chanting of Jiali is characterized by a relatively simple melody and needs to include the musical intricacy observed in Miao's ancient songs. Furthermore, the diminishing population of individuals fluent in the Miao language (Luo and Lin, 2023), along with the prohibition of reciting specific aspects of Jiali, will establish linguistic and cultural obstacles. This limitation highlights that Jiali belongs to something other than the category of aesthetic arts or craftsmanship. Therefore, it is not feasible to compare Jiali and other ICHs in terms of economic contribution.

Field research revealed that even when Wanda Town invited LHT, a national-level inheritor, to perform Jiali, he declined the invitation. He explained, "I am only seated and reciting Jiali, and the others are unable to comprehend it." It is perceived as needing more interest. In contrast to those engaged in manual work, where the outcome is a physical product, the intangible nature of this practice means that there is no tangible result. Furthermore, an increasing number of young people are choosing to pursue employment opportunities outside of their hometowns, which has resulted in a stagnation of their Jiali learning. "After investing a considerable number of years in this pursuit, upon my return, I find myself still reciting the same few lines, with no discernible advancement." The lack of economic value has resulted in a notable decline in the number of individuals willing to pursue the study of Jiali. This has led to a "master has no disciple" situation.

## 7.2. *External Transmission Faces Challenges*

### 7.2.1. *Tourism Performance Remains on the Surface*

In the context of tourism, the cultural significance of some ICHs may be weakened or overlooked while transforming it into a commodity (Cardinale, 2019). The commercial and cultural performances of Jiali, while serving to enhance public awareness to a certain extent, frequently need to adequately address the intricacies and reverence inherent to the original context of Jiali. This results in the dilution and simplification of the tacit knowledge embedded within it.

To illustrate this point, one might consider the case of Wanda Town. Despite the Jiali masters maintaining a devout attitude and adhering strictly to traditional rituals during ceremonies, the length of the rituals is compressed and the timing of the festivals is adjusted to cater to tourist demands. While the ritual of worshipping ancestors (??) is fully preserved, the use of Jiali gradually shifts towards visual effects that appeal to tourists' expectations in the majority of performances. For example, the Jiali masters hold ritual implements and wear traditional costumes, creating images that evoke a sense of nostalgia and appeal to the imaginations of external tourists, who may perceive Miao culture as ancient and mysterious.

John Urry (2009) posits that the "tourist gaze" represents a fundamental aspect of the tourism experience. The gaze represents the most fundamental visual aspect of the tourism experience, whereby tourists direct their attention towards symbols that they seek out in classic tourist sites, having temporarily detached themselves from their everyday life experiences. Indeed, the act of traveling serves to consolidate the connection between the tourist gaze objects and the tourists' imaginations. Urry's "tourist gaze" and MacCannell's "staged authenticity" jointly illuminate this dilemma. The compressed rituals and nostalgic aesthetics at Wanda Town construct a "front stage" performance where Jiali is reduced to visual symbols that satisfy tourists' desire for exotic otherness. However, this staged authenticity obscures the "back stage" of Jiali-- the tacit knowledge embedded in prolonged rituals, contextual interactions, and adaptive practices. Such performances risk displace the original cultural logic, as the need to meet tourist expectations prioritises form over function. Consequently, the pragmatic wisdom of Jiali (e.g., conflict resolution, ecological harmony) becomes invisible, leaving only a superficial cultural shell.

### 7.2.2. *The Absence of Contextual Inheritance in the Classroom*

In school education, knowledge is primarily transmitted by teachers, but in Miao society, this role is traditionally fulfilled by the Jiali masters. In addition to imparting knowledge regarding interpersonal relationships and local knowledge in diverse settings, the Jiali masters also assume the role of ceremony leader. In the context of these ceremonies, they disseminate tacit knowledge and facilitate the socialization and cultural transmission of individuals. This process constitutes a comprehensive educational cycle. The recipients of the education in

Jiali rituals are not only those directly involved in resolving conflicts, but also the observers and onlookers who participate in the ceremony. Furthermore, these individuals gain insight into the Miao's way of life through the transmission of tacit knowledge from the Jiali masters.

While integrating Jiali into school curricula offers new opportunities for the transmission, the inherent tension between modern pedagogy and traditional apprenticeship model poses critical challenges. In Miao society, Jiali masters function not merely as instructors but as embodied mediators of tacit knowledge. Their teachings are embedded in ritual performances community disputes and cultural ceremonies. Contexts where apprentices learn through legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), gradually internalizing norms through observation and hands-on practice.

In contrast, classroom education prioritizes standardized knowledge transfer. Teachers, despite receiving formal training on Jiali texts, often lack the lived experience of leading rituals or mediating conflicts. This disjuncture echoes Bourdieu's (1990) critique of scholastic bias-- the tendency to abstract knowledge from its practical context. For instance, when Jiali is reduced to textbook excerpts, students encounter a decontextualised version divorced from the dynamic interplay of gestures, tones and situational adaptations that define real world Jiali practice. A Jiali master's ability to adjust ritual recitations based on attendees' emotions or environmental cues, a core aspect of tacit knowledge, cannot be codified into lesson plans. This pedagogical shift risks transforming Jiali from a living practice into a static cultural artifact. Without contextual immersion, students grasp fragmented symbols (e.g., ceremonial phrases) but miss the holistic worldview that binds them and undermines Jiali's role in sustaining Miao social cohesion.

## 8. Summary

The tacit knowledge that has been accumulated over time represents the fundamental element that has enabled Jiali masters to endure to the present day. It is not solely reliant on explicit knowledge carriers; it also depends on the practice-based context of its original culture. It is only through oral instruction, modeling between masters and apprentices, and repeated practice in real-life settings that the knowledge embedded in Jiali can be truly internalized. However, the contemporary transmission of Jiali needs to be improved in this cultural ecosystem. From an internal perspective, the transmission of Jiali is experiencing fragmentation as a result of social change. From an external perspective, while educational modernization and cultural commercial performances have provided new avenues for disseminating Jiali, they are unable to reproduce its intricate context and profound meanings. Consequently, tacit knowledge remains superficial and fragmented. In the context of commercialization and educational modernization, the key issue in overcoming the challenges to tacit knowledge transmission is to achieve a balance between the traditional essence of Jiali and modern needs.

## 9. Optimizing the Inheritance of Tacit Knowledge in Jiali

### 9.1. Understanding Traditional Culture and Strengthening Ethnic Cultural Identity

The inheritance of ethnic culture is often marred by prejudices and misunderstandings, which can be attributed to a lack of recognition of the interdependent and dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity. Some individuals perceive ethnic traditional culture as a static and anachronistic form incompatible with the demands of modernity. Ethnic traditional cultures were formed based on past production methods, yet societal changes have resulted in the obsolescence of some cultural practices in meeting contemporary needs. Nevertheless, traditional cultures encompass a plethora of cultural essences, and they are undergoing a process of modern transformation. As Zou (2007, p.12-16) observes, we cannot transcend the conceptual framework of ethnic traditions; our understanding inevitably takes place within the confines of cultural heritage, whether consciously or not, as cultural traditions continuously influence and shape our perspectives. It is, therefore, crucial to approach traditional cultures with a balanced perspective, recognizing their enduring significance and ensuring the transmission of their exemplary elements to reinforce ethnic cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

Tradition and modernity are inextricably linked in the context of contemporary society (Shang and Wang, 2024), establishing a duality that can be conceptualized as two sides of the same coin. It is imperative to attain long-term development through innovation by maintaining a balance between the two. Otherwise, people are at risk of becoming disoriented, losing ethnic identity, and becoming rootless. Consequently, we must adopt a thoughtful approach to our ethnic and cultural traditions, which are an inextricable component of our identity at both the individual and national levels.



Historical evidence demonstrates that the exemplary traditional culture of China has been constituted through the sustained integration of disparate ethnic groups. It is imperative to delve deeply into the exemplary and shared cultural resources inherent to the traditional cultures of various ethnic groups to fortify a sense of ethnic identity. Jia Li encompasses a wealth of valuable traditional cultural resources, comprising hidden treasures that can facilitate the construction of a “shared spiritual home.” These resources necessitate meticulous exploration, improvement, and adaptation to identify the most effective pathways for their transmission.

## **9.2 Elevating the Status of Jiali Masters, Uncovering the Governance Function of Jiali in Rural Areas**

Jiali masters, as the principal inheritors of Jiali, are not only practitioners of culture but also the primary carriers of tacit knowledge. However, the social status and cultural influence of Jiali masters have significantly declined due to modernization. This not only reduces the motivation for the transmission of Jiali but also leads to a decrease in interest among the younger generation in pursuing mastery of Jiali. To optimize the transmission of Jiali, it is essential to enhance the status of Jiali masters through various methods, thereby restoring their position as respected figures within Miao society. In traditional Miao society, the role of Jiali masters was of great importance in the resolution of disputes and the maintenance of community order through the application of customary law. In the context of the modern legal system, it is important to recognize that laws are universal and do not take into account local customs or individual behaviors. In other words, legislation is universally applicable and does not take into account the specific nuances of local customs (Rousseau, 2003). The incorporation of customary law as a supplementary legal source in Article 10, Civil Code of the People's Republic of China (2022): “In handling civil disputes, the law shall be followed; where the law does not provide customs, they may be applied, but they must not violate public order and good morals” (p. 15). The law provides an opportunity to consider reintegrating Jiali masters into the grassroots governance system. By engaging them as rural mediators in community affairs, this approach would not only make effective use of Jiali masters' knowledge of culture and customary law but also address the limitations of modern legal systems in local governance, thereby enhancing the social influence of Jiali masters.

## **9.3 Reconstructing the Cultural Context of Jiali**

The transfer of tacit knowledge is contingent upon the specific cultural context in which it is conveyed. Because Jiali is a ceremonial practice, it must be carried out within a specific environmental context. The process of modernization, on the other hand, has incrementally led to the dismantling of these arrangements. One of the most important things that need to be done to maximize the transmission of Jiali is to reconstruct its cultural framework in such a way that it may be adapted to contemporary culture.

To begin, the restoration of Jiali's ritualistic settings can be accomplished through the utilization of digital technology. Additionally, the construction of a Jiali database and digital museum, in conjunction with the utilization of virtual reality technology, provides a way of not only conserving the ceremonial character of Jiali but also creating an immersive experience for the audience. A successful application is the digital preservation project of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang. By employing high-precision 3D scanning and virtual reality technologies, researchers have not only preserved the original form of murals and sculptures but also enabled audiences to immerse themselves in the cultural atmosphere of the Mogao Grottoes through virtual reality devices (Li and Ji, 2024). In addition to providing a simple means of learning and disseminating information, this strategy has the potential to solve the problem of disappearing ritual spaces, thereby preserving invaluable knowledge for future generations.

A second point to consider is that social media platforms like TikTok and other social media can be utilized to disseminate the fundamental content and ritualistic scenes of Jiali through the utilization of brief video presentations. This will attract a larger demographic of younger individuals to learn about and engage with Jiali. This strategy has the additional benefit of being able to transcend the limitations of time and geography, which enables Jiali to have a significantly broader reach and a significant increase in the public's recognition and impact.

## **10. Conclusion and Further Research Directions**

This study explores the tacit knowledge embedded in Jiali, a vital component of the Miao people's cultural heritage. Through the implementation of ethnographic fieldwork spanning two agricultural cycles, complemented by thematic analysis, this study identifies pivotal aspects of Jiali's transmission. These include

the characteristics of its tacit knowledge, the challenges posed by modernization, and strategies that may support its preservation.

The findings suggest that tacit knowledge plays a pivotal role in maintaining the authenticity and adaptability of Jiali. The study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge within this tradition, offering preliminary insights into the adaptation of intangible cultural heritage to evolving social and cultural contexts.

While the research is grounded in the specific context of Jiali, it opens avenues for further exploration into the dynamics of tacit knowledge within other oral traditions. Furthermore, the study poses significant questions regarding the preservation and revitalization of traditional practices in modern contexts. The findings of this study may serve as a valuable reference point for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners who are engaged in the pursuit of preserving intangible cultural heritage through community engagement and the utilization of digital tools.

However, the scope of this study is inherently limited by its focus on a single community and cultural practice. Consequently, the conclusions of this study should be regarded as a preliminary basis for further discussion rather than definitive statements. Further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of modernization on tacit knowledge and to explore comparative perspectives across diverse cultural settings.

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