

Safeguarding the Intangible Heritage of Yunnan Spinning Tops: A Study from the Perspective of Living Heritage Theory

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Abstract

Amid modernization challenges, Yunnan spinning top culture (Jizong, Jinggu, and Shuangbai) exemplifies the adaptive crisis faced by intangible cultural heritage (ICH), where conventional preservation models struggle to sustain its living essence. While prior research prioritizes static documentation, this study employs living heritage theory to decode the cultural genetics of spinning top traditions through ethnographic fieldwork and policy analysis. Findings reveal that survival threats originate from the erosion of three core cultural genes: ritual symbolism, craftsmanship epistemology, and collective memory transmission. The research proposes a three-tiered conservation framework: Genetic Priority safeguards cultural DNA through digitizing endangered techniques and establishing decentralized authentication systems, while ethically reinterpreting ritual practices via augmented reality narratives; Functional Adaptation innovates dual mechanisms preserving heritage-grade craftsmanship alongside adaptive derivatives like sensor-enabled cultural artifacts; System-Technology-Community Synergy integrates legal safeguards, AI-assisted skill transmission, and cross-regional governance networks. As living heritage theory emphasizes, protection requires not fossilization but revitalization through innovation. This paradigm shift enables Yunnan spinning tops to transcend the traps of musealization, achieving a transformation from static heritage to dynamic "living capital" through four-dimensional synergy: genetic continuity, technological adaptation, institutional empowerment, and community agency. The framework provides actionable pathways for

traditional practices to function as social infrastructure in globalizing societies, ultimately enhancing cultural sustainability through symbiotic evolution.

Keywords: living heritage theory; Yunnan spinning tops; intangible cultural heritage; adaptive revitalization

Introduction

Yunnan spinning tops are a living cultural heritage shared by many ethnic groups in Southwest China, and their history can be traced back to the Neolithic Age. As a traditional national sport that combines entertainment, competition, and ceremonies, spinning tops have witnessed the progress of human craftsmanship and social and cultural integration through the evolution of materials such as wood, clay, and metal (He & He, 2023). Spinning Tops are not only a carrier of childhood memories, but also a condensation of historical memories of ethnic groups in the minority areas of Yunnan. For example, the Jizong spinning top is based on wild mushrooms, and purple pomelo wood is used to carve national totems, which conveys the wisdom of craftsmen in the technique of throwing and catching more than 30 meters high; the Jizong spinning top and the Shuangbai spinning top are differentiated through the differentiation of the gameplay of “playing against the winner” and “bumping”, which reflect the spiritual beliefs and life philosophies of the Dai and Yi ethnic groups.⁵ The Jizong spinning top has been used as an example of the Jizong spinning top, which is a symbol of the Jizong spinning top's spirituality and philosophy of life, as well as the Jizong spinning top, Yi, and other ethnic groups' spiritual beliefs and philosophy of life (Qian, 2019). These Spinning Tops come in different shapes and forms. In the Spring Festival rituals, ethnic minority festivals, and farming competitions, they jointly build up a cultural ecosystem with the trinity of “skills, beliefs, and communities”, which is a vivid epitome of Yunnan's cultural diversity.

Although the Yunnan Spinning Tops are on the national and provincial lists of intangible cultural heritage, their survival is facing multiple challenges (Kuang & Liu, 2024). In the process of modernization, the space for traditional ceremonies is shrinking as a result of accelerated urbanization, for example, the Spinning Tops have been transformed from sacred village rituals into cultural and tourism performances, with the cultural symbolism gradually fading; the chain of transmission of the skills is endangered by inter-generational ruptures, with the average age of the inheritors reaching 62 years, and young people being removed from the system of

transmission due to the flow of work and education. Data show that the core production family of Spinning Tops in Yunnan has decreased by 40% in the last decade, and the contradiction between the ecological protection policy of handmade timber (e.g., Ba chi wood, Qing xiang wood) and the demand for fetching timber has intensified. More seriously, the dissolution of the meaning of cultural symbols has led to an identity crisis.

Existing research focuses on the competitive rules and performance forms of Spinning Tops. However, there is a severe lack of investigation into the cultural origins and local beliefs associated with spinning tops. For example, the symbolic system of Jizong spinning tops, the time correlation between Jizong Spinning Tops and the farming cycle, and other profound cultural logics have not yet been clarified, leading to the superficialization of protection practices. More critically, research perspectives are mostly limited to static records, lacking dynamic analysis of the living transmission mechanism. UNESCO's Ethical Principles for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasize the central position of “community subjectivity”, but the current mode of safeguarding is still dominated by the government-led “museum-type preservation”, which fails to activate the endogenous dynamics of the community (UNESCO, 2003). This tendency to “focus on technological preservation rather than practical revitalization” has led to a disconnect between digital archives and community life, exacerbating the crisis of formalization of cultural heritage. At the international level, the Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage requires States Parties to build participatory “bottom-up” safeguarding systems (UNESCO, 2015). Domestic policies, such as the Regulations for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Yunnan Province, explicitly put forward the goal of “holistic protection of cultural ecology,” laying the foundation for the legal protection and practical innovation of Spinning Tops culture (Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2011).

The predicament of the Yunnan Spinning Tops is essentially a crisis of cultural adaptation in the process of modernization. The theory of living heritage guides us: Protection is not to sequester, but to activate its inherent vitality through innovation (Zhao, 2016). Therefore, based on the theory of living heritage, this study proposes a systematic Protection strategy to address the heritage crisis of Yunnan Spinning Tops culture. A synergistic network of “genetic survival–technological innovation–institutional protection–community participation” can be constructed to enable the Yunnan Spinning Tops to be better inherited and protected. At the same time, it provides a viable paradigm for the living inheritance of similar non–legacy projects, facilitating the organic integration of traditional culture and contemporary life.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the history, beliefs, and current situation of Spinning Tops in Yunnan, guided by the theory of living heritage.
2. To explore the adaptive crisis and living protection mechanism of Yunnan Spinning Tops in the process of modernization.

Literature Review

Existing research on Yunnan Spinning Tops has focused on the dilemmas of inheritance, analysis of participant groups, and development strategies. Scholars have generally noted that the Spinning Tops face challenges such as intergenerational rifts, inadequate venue facilities, a lack of standardized competitive equipment, and insufficient institutional support (Kuang & Liu, 2024). The study of the Jinggu Spinning Tops reveals its festival-dependent characteristics, emphasizing the need to rely on traditional festivals to maintain group participation and cohesion. The study of the Jinggu Spinning Tops is also a good example of a traditional festival, illustrating how the Spinning Tops have been passed down from one generation to the next (Qian, 2019). However, studies in the Pu'er region have analyzed the multidimensional value of material, institutional, and spiritual culture (Luo, 2024). Some scholars have proposed improving the situation through Internet live streaming, campus curriculum development, and social mobilization (He & He, 2023). However, these suggestions focus on promoting technology or optimizing policy and fail to address the essential contradiction of cultural survival. It is worth noting that although the existing literature focuses on gender imbalance. For example, structural difficulties such as low female participation rates and limited occupational distribution (Luo, 2022). However, there is a general lack of in-depth discussion on the “living nature” of Spinning Tops culture, for example, the dynamic connection between religious beliefs and ceremonies, the impact of technological innovation on cultural genes, and the disintegration of the spiritual core due to the rupture of community participation are seldom addressed. Especially important is that existing studies have not yet introduced the theoretical perspective of living heritage, have failed to examine the functional transformation path of Spinning Tops culture from the dimension of “dynamic continuity”, and have failed to propose the synergistic strategy of “genotypic survival” and “expressive innovation”. The absence of this theory has led to the proposal that protection mostly stays in superficial repair,

failing to truly activate the endogenous vitality of traditional culture, highlighting the urgent need for a theory and methodology of living preservation.

Conceptual Framework

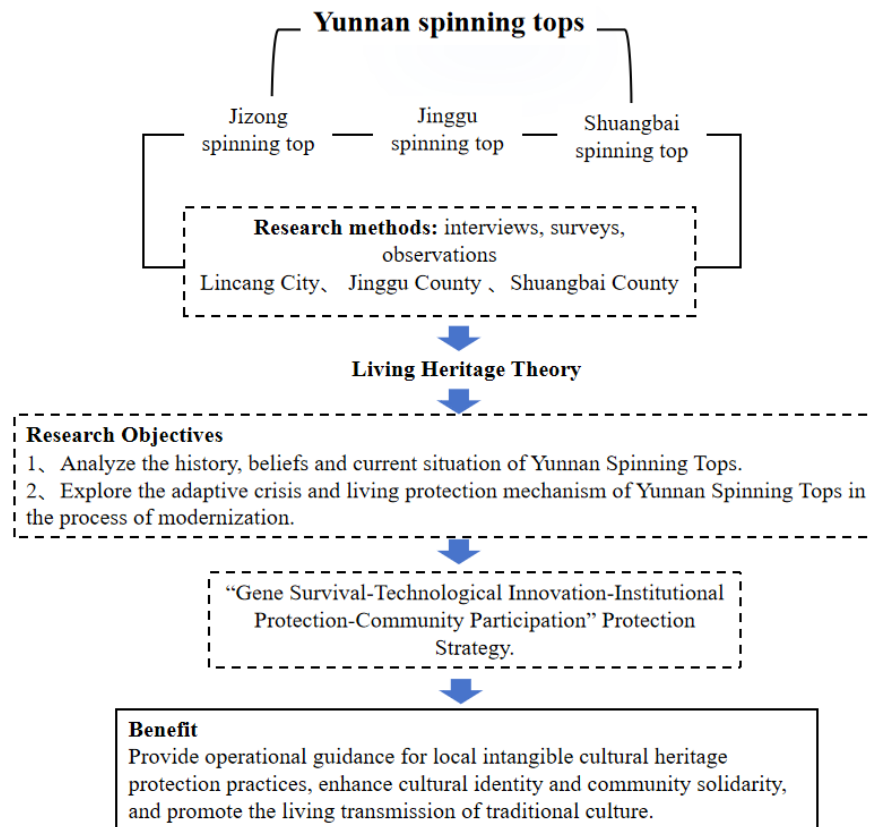


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method, guided by the theory of living heritage. It conducts interviews, observations, and investigations in three areas, namely, Dong et Village in Lincang City (Jizong Spinning Tops origin), Jinggu County in Pu'er City (Jinggu Spinning Tops origin), and Shuangbai County in Chuxiong Prefecture (Shuangbai Spinning Tops origin). The origins of these three Spinning Tops, the current state of development, and the beliefs carried by the Yunnan Spinning Tops were recorded, and then suggestions on how to protect the Yunnan Spinning Tops were made.

Target groups inheritance main body: 4 provincial/county-level non-genetic inheritors.
Community members: 10 village elders who have participated in Spinning Tops activities for a long

time. Management: 4 staff members of the local cultural department and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center.

Research Results

Origin of Yunnan Spinning Tops

Jizong Spinning Tops

The origin of the Jizong spinning Tops is intertwined with the dual narratives of cultural fusion and nature worship. Two legends circulating in Wa folklore reveal its multi-cultural undertones: first, the Spinning Tops brought by Zhuge Liang's southward expedition during the Three Kingdoms period were initially used as a sacrificial tool in the Wa "Dragon Festival".where the spinning Tops were used to talk to the gods and pray for favorable winds and rains; and second, the headman of the Wa tribe was inspired by the peacock's dream to create the Tops based on Jizong mushrooms. It symbolizes the community's gratitude for the gift of nature during migration – the legend of consuming Spinning Tops to enhance physical fitness, which elevates Spinning Tops from a practical tool to a totem for the reproduction of life (Wang & Wu, 2022). These two origins reflect the two-way process of "localization of foreign technology" and "materialization of natural beliefs" in Wa culture.

Among the shapes and ceremonies of the Jizong spinning top, its cultural symbols are particularly distinctive. The shape of its umbrella cover imitates that of the Jizong mushroom, and it is made of zi shan wood with colorful sun patterns, which is not only an imitation of natural creatures but also a metaphor for the Wa's creation myth of "light dispersing darkness". In the "Xuan san ceremonies" that appeared in the Ming Dynasty, Wa men were required to perform complicated maneuvers such as throwing and catching from a height and spinning on their hips, which were not only a test of skill, but also regarded as a way to convey the spirit of bravery and courage of the ethnic group through physical practice. This fusion of competition and ceremonies has made the Spinning Tops the core carrier of the Wa male rite of passage, reinforcing the ethical values of bravery and self-confidence.

From the Three Kingdoms to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the function of the Jizong spinning top transformed from sacred to secular. The Jizong spinning Tops, which were used as ritual instruments in the early days, gradually evolved into multi-player performances during the Water Festival and the New Rice Festival, as well as competitions and other challenging events that symbolized toughness (Wu & Yuan, 2018). Wa villages reorganized their social power

structure through competitive ranking, with winners often being elected as hunting chiefs. This evolution not only preserves the reverence for nature, but also shapes the Spinning Tops as a dynamic marker of Wa cultural identity.

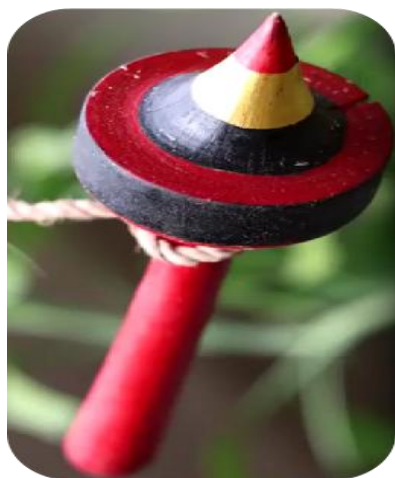


Figure 2: Jizong Spinning Top

Jinggu Spinning Tops

Jinggu Spinning Tops was born from a romantic narrative that transcends class. It is the emotional bond and ecological struggle of the Yi people. According to legend, Li Shigui, a young man of the Yi tribe, was separated from his lover due to the disparity between the rich and the poor, and used a carved wooden Spinning Tops to send his love to his lover, which was advocated by Li Si, the tribal leader, and evolved into a festive activity for all the people to participate in. A deeper origin is related to the ecological struggle. Legend has it that Li Si was honored as the “God of Spinning Tops” after he successfully begged for rain through the Spinning Tops Competition to relieve the drought crisis, and was given the power to communicate with heaven and earth. The two origins of the Spinning Tops point to the materialization of human emotions and the ritualization of nature worship, which together build the “human and god's entertainment” quality of the Jinggu Spinning Tops.

As a Yi cultural symbol, the Jinggu Spinning Tops are made of Bachi wood and other hardwoods, and their whipping and spinning dynamics are regarded as a metaphor for the cycle of life (UNESCO, 2003). The “San jie dou Spinning Tops” ceremonies, which originated in the Qing Dynasty, required players to represent the three realms of heaven, earth, and humanity, with the winner symbolizing the community's access to nature's blessings (Li, 2018). This design of integrating the cosmology into the rules of competition, so that Spinning Tops competitions go

beyond the function of entertainment, then reflects the unique cognition of the equality of life in the Yi culture.

The evolution of the Jinggu Spinning Tops from a recreational tool to a medium of community cohesion reflects the wisdom of cultural adaptation. In the early days, people used long whips to beat Spinning Tops in a duel, and the clashing of Spinning Tops with each other was interpreted as a symbolic act to “drive away evil”. Every year during the Torchlight Festival, Jinggu villages jointly organize inter-ethnic Spinning Tops competitions, with the winner's village gaining the right to host the following year's festival (Liu, 2022). This mechanism of distributing cultural power through competition not only strengthens community identity but also serves as a peaceful way to resolve resource disputes, demonstrating the Yi's wisdom in governance of “using martial arts to stop the war”.



Figure 3: Jinggu Spinning Top

Shuangbai Spinning Tops

The origin of the Spinning Tops is deeply imprinted with the survival wisdom of the Yi ancestors, their hunting heritage, and fighting philosophy (Luo, 2024). To cope with the limitations of throwing wooden sticks during the hunting era, Yi hunters invented the long-distance weapon of “soft rattan tied with stones.” This practical technology was later improved and evolved into Spinning Tops, embodying the creative transformation from a survival tool to a cultural symbol.

In terms of shape design, the Spinning Tops are a perfect blend of practicality and symbolism. The rugged shape and low center of gravity structure continue the pursuit of throwing stability during the hunting era; the rope wrapping technique retains the original memory of binding stones with soft rattan, while the “Wei luo zhen” tactic in the impact race is an abstract

reproduction of the ancient hunting and rounding up strategy (He & He, 2023). The spiritual core of Spinning Tops is centered on its educational value. According to Qing Dynasty documents, the chiefs of the Yi tribe in Shuangbai used to select warriors through Spinning Top competitions, and the outstanding players could join the guards directly (Kuang & Liu, 2024). The design of this trinity of entertainment, education, and military functions enables the Shuangbai Spinning Tops to transcend ordinary sports programs and become a living legacy system for the martial spirit of the Yi people.



Figure 4: Shuangbai Spinning Top

Development Status of Yunnan Spinning Tops

Jizong spinning tops

Jizong spinning Tops are facing intergenerational issues, commercialization, a cultural identity crisis, and a loss of skills. Although Wa villagers still have a strong sense of pride in it, the younger generation's understanding of the origin legend, ceremonies, and totem symbols is becoming increasingly vague. Young villagers can hardly tell the whole story of the “Peacock Dreaming” legend. At the same time, the Spinning Tops culture, which tourists often contact, has been alienated by commercialized packaging, and the traditional “Xuan san ceremonies” have been simplified into programmed performances, featuring highly homogeneous soundtracks and movements, thus losing the originality and creativity of the Wa villages and accelerating the dissolution of cultural symbols. The cultural symbols of Wa villages have been accelerated and dissolved.

The collapse of the competition system reflects the deterioration of the heritage ecology. In 2024, the number of participants in the Jizong spinning Tops competition, which is the core activity

of the Wa “Ku zaza Festival”, will drop by 76% compared with 2013, of which 68% will be middle-aged and older people over 40 years of age, with a serious gap in the number of young competitors. The participation rate of women is less than 5 percent (See Table 1). Only 9 of the 28 techniques recorded in the traditional Spinning Tops Sutra remain.

The disappearance of ceremonies has accelerated the stripping away of cultural significance. The Jizong spinning top now becomes a mere entertainment tool. The proportion of traditional sunburst patterns has fallen below 30%. The forestry ban exacerbates the raw material crisis, and the cost of obtaining zishan wood rises; as a result, artisans are forced to switch to Yang wood.

The disappearance of ceremonies has accelerated the stripping away of cultural significance. Villagers still perform Jizong spinning Tops on traditional holidays every year, but only for entertainment; the ceremonies are simplified, and most importantly, most of the participants are middle-aged and old people, with few young people. The traditional sunburst pattern on the Jizong spinning Tops is also disappearing. Coupled with the forestry ban, which has exacerbated the raw material crisis, the cost of obtaining zishan wood has risen, and craftsmen have been forced to switch to Yang wood.

Table 1: Jizong spinning top participation in 2024 compared to 2013

Age	Participation ratio	Compare the changes in 2013
Over 40 years old	68%	+20%
30–40 years old	22%	–15%
Under 30	10% (All are out-of-town study groups)	–5%
(Data Source: Lincang County Cultural and Tourism Bureau Report)		

Jinggu Spinning Tops

The Jinggu Spinning Tops are in danger of losing their identity and skills. 2024 data shows that the number of participants in Jinggu's annual Spinning Tops competitions has dropped by 46.2% over the past decade, and the number of villages covered by the village-level monthly competitions has dropped from 32 to 18, while the proportion of cross-border competitors has soared to 29%. More alarming is the age gap: 18–30 years old young players accounted for 22%, plummeted to 9%, the over 40 years old group soared to 60%, Mangka Village, the youngest participant, reached 42 years old (See Table 2). Jinggu Spinning Tops is regarded as an “old man's game”.

In terms of the production process, the traditional rake tooth wood is on the verge of depletion due to its long growth cycle, and the craftsman, Master Zhang, confessed, “It takes three mountains to find a piece of qualified wood.” Therefore, composite materials have essentially replaced traditional materials. The production tools have also undergone significant changes, and modern power tools have become the most crucial tools for making Jinggu Spinning Tops. Because of the change of materials and tools, 70% of Jinggu Spinning Tops have lost the totemic charm of Yi “tiger pattern”.

Confusion over tournament rules has exposed a systemic crisis. The use of synthetic carbon fiber Spinning Tops has reached 67%, intensifying the conflict with traditional wooden Spinning Tops. The 2023 Jinggu Spinning Tops Provincial League was forced to interrupt due to the conflict between “modern” and “traditional” rules.

Table 2 Jinggu Spinning Tops 2014–2024 Race Participant Age Change

Age	2014	2024	Rate of change
18– 30 Age	22%	9%	–59%
30– 40 Age	45%	31%	–31%
Over 40 years old	33%	60%	+81%

(Data: King County Cultural and Tourism Bureau report)

Shuangbai Spinning Tops

Between 2014 and 2024, the number of annual participants in the Shuangbai Spinning Tops has plummeted by 58.6% (Luo, 2022). The oldest participant is 62 years old. The use of the “Tiger Pounce Throwing” technique, which symbolizes the hunting wisdom of the Yi people, plummeted from 72% to 19%. The use of synthetic materials reached 71%, and in 2024, the Yunnan provincial government listed it as a provincial “endangered rescue project” (See Table 3).

Table 3: Age Changes of Participants in the Twinning Tops 2014–2024 Competition

Age	2014	2024	Rate of change
18– 35 Age	38%	11%	–58%
35– 50 Age	45%	33%	–12%
Over 50 years old	17%	56%	+39%

Data: 2024 Shuangbai County Tourism Bureau report

Spinning Tops Beliefs in Yunnan

Jizong Spinning Tops

Interviews conducted by the author revealed that the act of painting Jizong spinning Tops on houses reflects the Wa society's dual belief in the worship of nature's spiritual power and the function of protecting the house from evil spirits.

The shape of the Jizong spinning Tops originates from the Jizong (a type of wild fungus), which is regarded as a figurative symbol of the life force and the gifts of nature in Wa culture. It is a symbol of the shelter provided by nature (Li, 2018). The use of this totem on the wall of a house is not only an expression of gratitude for the gift of nature, but also a metaphor for “the family house is like an umbrella of fungus”, which is a way to pray for the prosperity of the family and the abundance of grains through the exuberant vitality of the fungus. It is written in the ancient Wa song “Sigangli” that “fungus produces rotting wood, rotting wood becomes soil, and soil nurtures all things”, and the Jizong totem is thus endowed with the cyclic divine power of “unending life”.

The spinning nature of the Spinning Tops is abstracted as a dynamic talisman to ward off evil spirits. The Wa believe that a static totem is only symbolic. At the same time, a spinning top can continuously release a “vortex of spiritual power”, forming an energy field to ward off evil spirits. The Spinning Tops on the lintel of a house are often accompanied by flames or lightning patterns, reinforcing the effectiveness of “exorcism” through the superimposition of visual symbols. Priests (Pima) recite the “Anjiao Jing” during the drawing process, which transforms the Spinning Tops' physical kinetic energy into supernatural defense power.

Ceremonies incorporating Buddhist elements. With the introduction of Southern Buddhism, some Wa villages have combined Spinning Tops with Buddhist symbols (such as the Dharma wheel and the lotus flower). For example, in house murals in the Cangyuan area, the Jizong spinning Tops are often placed on lotus seats, symbolizing the Buddhist guardianship of “spinning the wheel of the Dharma”. During the Water Splashing Festival, villagers sprinkle the Spinning Tops on the walls with glutinous rice water, following the Buddhist tradition of “bathing in the Buddha” and continuing the logic of the Wa ritual of “calling the rain to spin”.



Figure 5: Jizong spinning top pattern drawn on the house

Jinggu Spinning Tops

The Jinggu Spinning Tops are a materialized practice of Hinayana Buddhist philosophy. After interviewing local villagers, the author learned that during the “rainy rest period” (corresponding to the 108 troubles of Buddhism), 108 days after the Water Splashing Festival, villagers make Spinning Tops from machetes and logs by soaking them in glutinous rice water, and then immerse them in the temple reservoirs to purify the sins. The central ceremonies, “san jie dou Spinning Tops”, are characterized by philosophical wisdom (UNESCO, 2003). The human race requires the Spinning Tops to rotate on the Bodhi leaf without hurting the leaf veins, testing the reverence for the laws of nature; the Shura race involves maneuvering the Spinning Tops on a floating board on the surface of the water, using the water pattern of the mandala as a metaphor for transforming the heart of the struggle. The celestial race involves rotating the Spinning Tops on the scripture streamers, transforming the physical kinetic energy into the merit of spiritual cultivation. The losers must make offerings of candles and rice in the temple, which builds a moral discipline mechanism of “fault-compensation-sublimation” (Zhang, 2020). During the interview, the author learned that the Jinggu Spinning Tops are undergoing a profound transformation. The inheritor Li Yu will practice Spinning Tops in the meditation course, and urban white-collar workers will experience “dynamic meditation” with the spinning gyro. This creative transformation may open up a path for the Jinggu Spinning Tops to survive beyond tradition.

Shuangbai Spinning Tops

Shuangbai Spinning Tops is a living extension of the “Tiger” totem worship of the Yi people. It is the living code of Yi martial spirit and the memory of war in blood and fire (Liu, 2021).

Shuangbai is located in the throat of Dianzhong, since the Yuan and Ming Dynasties were places of war. County records, covering only the Ming Hongwu years, indicate that the county changed hands seven times in the master's hands. Frequent fighting gave birth to a unique wisdom of survival, according to “Shuangbai Feng wu zhi”, the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the local people will enemy armor melted into Spinning Tops, held on the day of victory in the war spinning Spinning Tops competition to “turn away bad luck” in the name of sacrifices to the spirits of the dead. After an interview with Zhou Yong, a non-genetic heritage bearer, he told the author that the “Blood Sacrifice of Spinning Tops” ceremonies of the Tiger God Festival on the 24th day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar have been completely discontinued due to the restrictions of the Animal Protection Laws and excessive cruelty. The ceremonies require people to use a cane whip to wound their calves, drip blood on the Spinning Tops to stimulate the “hu sha” spirit of war, and then maintain the spinning Tops in the center of the tiger's eye stone target for 15 minutes. These are, in fact, symbolic preservations of ancient military training, and such ceremonies have resulted in a 40 percent reduction in combat fatalities (Zhang, 2020). Although the ancient “Blood Sacrifice of Spinning Tops” has been completely interrupted due to the change of time, the Yi spirit of martial arts and the belief in resistance cannot be completely disappeared.

Discussions

Living heritage theory emphasizes the “dynamic continuity” of cultural heritage, centered on community participation, functional survival, holistic tangible–intangible linkages, and adaptive innovations (Zhao, 2016). The current situation of Yunnan Spinning Tops confirms that their living nature is facing challenges: the low participation rate of young people has led to a lack of inheritance subjects, and the 67% share of carbon fiber Spinning Tops in Jinggu has severed the symbiotic relationship between traditional wooden arts and beliefs. However, the practice of digitization reveals the “genotype survival” of living heritage, as long as the core cultural gene (God) continues through technological innovation, it is in line with the logic of “dynamic Protection” of living heritage. Jinggu Spinning Tops' “Dynamic Meditation” program validates the theory of “functional regeneration”: when traditional culture is removed from its original context (e.g., war, farming), it can still be activated through functional transformation (meditation, e-sports) to its modern value.

New Knowledge from Research

In terms of cultural lineage and existential dilemma, Yunnan Spinning tops culture shows a profound evolution from a production tool to a spiritual symbol. Taking the Wa Jizong Spinning tops as an example, the Spinning tops imported from the Three Kingdoms period are intertwined with the ancient legend of the peacock's dream, which was eventually condensed into a philosophical symbol of the cycle of life in the ceremonies; the Jinggu Spinning tops, through the touching legend of the clan's chief begging for rain, injected the Buddhist cosmology of the "three worlds" into the rules of the competition, which sublimated the ordinary recreational activities into the medium of dialogue between the heavenly and the human beings; and the Yi Shuangbai Spinning tops, which were developed from the hunting era's cane tied to a stone, were recorded in the blood rituals as the historical memory of the community's struggle. The Yi Shuangbai gyro was developed from the rattan and stone binding during the hunting era, and the records in the blood sacrifice ceremonies are the historical memories of the community's struggles. This cultural sublimation is encountering the drastic impact of modernity, the triple crisis formed by the substitution of materials, technology fault, and dissolution of ceremonies is shaking the foundation of Yunnan Spinning tops culture.

Digital era of guardianship, in the face of inheritance crisis, should explore a new path to take into account the cultural genes and the context of the times. The wisdom of Jinggu Spinning tops can lie in the transformation of the gyro competition into a dynamic meditation course, so that young people in the spinning experience concentration training; Shuangbai Spinning tops can boldly use blockchain technology, the soon-to-be-lost blood sacrifice ceremonies into a digital collection, so that the spirit of resistance behind the form of violence can be continued; Wa Jizong spinning top inheritance can be through the tourists' virtual sacrifice task to understand the connotation of nature worship. At the same time, protection requires institutional escort and technological empowerment, such as the development of AI centered debugging tools, educational intervention, such as the establishment of craft workshops in primary and secondary schools, and spatial reengineering, such as the addition of AR interactive devices at tourist attractions, to form a three-dimensional protection network.

Conclusion

Origin of Yunnan Spinning Tops

The origin of Yunnan Spinning Tops is deeply rooted in the wisdom of multi-ethnic survival and cultural fusion. The Jizong spinning Tops show the Wa's double vein of “cultural input and nature worship” – the skills imported from Zhuge Liang's southward expedition during the Three Kingdoms period and the Jizong spinning top created by the Wa's chiefs through the peacock's dream have completed the sublimation of the Jizong spinning top from a practical tool to a symbol of life. The Jinggu Spinning Tops originated from the love story of Li Shigui, a Yi youth. They developed a belief system centered on “human and god's entertainment” through the legend of the Spinning Tops seeking rain. Shuangbai Spinning Tops embodies the Yi survival practice, tracing its evolution from the history of hunting tools and the “Blood Sacrifice of Spinning Tops” to the memory of struggle, practical technology, and spiritual beliefs, all of which are encoded into a living representation of the spirit of martial arts. The origins of the three types of Spinning Tops show a creative transformation from “technical pragmatism” to “cultural symbolism”, epitomizing the diverse ethnic cultures of Yunnan.

Yunnan Spinning Tops Development Situation

Currently, Yunnan Spinning Tops is facing a serious crisis of living heritage, and its cultural symbols are undergoing accelerated dissolution. Jizong Spinning Tops, Jinggu Spinning Tops, and Shuangbai Spinning Tops are in structural decline, with the number of participants dropping sharply over the past ten years. Due to ecological needs, the use of synthetic materials is as high as 71%, and the survival rate of the “Tiger Pounce Throwing” technique, which symbolizes the wisdom of hunting, is less than 19%. These predicaments reflect the erosion of national cultural genes by industrialization and commercialization, as well as the collapse of the inheritance ecosystem caused by the breakdown of community participation.

Beliefs of Yunnan Spinning Tops

Spinning Tops' belief is the condensation of diversified ethnic cultures and survival wisdom, reflecting the multi-dimensional integration of nature worship, Buddhist philosophy, and war memory. The Jizong spinning top takes the Wa's “view of natural spiritual power” as its core. It builds up the belief system of “protecting the house with an umbrella” through the spiral ornamentation of the house totem and the dynamic function of driving away evil spirits, whose spinning characteristic is abstracted as an energy field to ward off evil spirits. Its rotating

characteristics are abstracted as an energy field to ward off evil spirits, and the integration of Buddhist elements (the wheel of law and the lotus flower) sublimates the primitive sorcery into a symbiotic symbol of “nature–religion”. The Jinggu Spinning Tops transforms the “san jie dou Spinning ‘into a dynamic practice through the materialization of Hinayana Buddhism. The Bodhi leaf in the Human World Race, the Mandala water pattern in the Shura Race, and the Merit of the Sutra Streamer in the Heavenly World Race correspond to the reverence for nature, the transformation of the struggling mind, and the advancement of wisdom in Buddhism, which make the competition become a process of’ fault – compensation – sublimation”. Compensation – Sublimation” moral discipline mechanism. As a living extension of the Tiger Totem of the Yi ethnic group, the Spinning Tops encode the spirit of martial arts with bloody “Blood Sacrifice of Spinning Tops” ceremonies, and sublimate the trauma of war and the wisdom of hunting into the genes of the ethnic group's resistance. This confirms the modern transformation of faith into “symbolic resistance”. The common essence of the three types of Spinning Tops lies in the fact that through the physical phenomenon of spinning, the experience of survival, philosophical discernment and spiritual beliefs are fused into cultural genes, completing the dialogue between tradition and modernity in the interweaving of reality and reality, providing more forms of paradigms for the living heritage of Yunnan's Spinning Tops culture.

Suggestions

Suggestions for protection

1. Prioritize the survival of genotypes:

Establish a “Spinning Tops cultural gene pool”, use motion capture technology to digitally model endangered techniques, and use blockchain technology to realize an immutable chain of inheritance.

Promote the ethical inheritance of “Separation of Form and Spirit”: Preserve the kernel of “martial spirit” in controversial ceremonies such as the “Blood Sacrifice of Spinning Tops”, and develop the “Spinning Tops Warrior God” AR game, which transforms the fire charcoal trekking to a virtual task.

2. Functional adaptation innovation:

Construct a “dual-track” event system: differentiate between “cultural heritage level” (e.g., Jinggu Handmade Wooden Spinning Tops) and “popular entertainment level” (carbon fiber

materials are allowed), with the former incorporated into the non-heritage assessment index. The former is included in the non-heritage assessment indicators, while the latter is related to the cultural tourism experience economy.

Develop functional derivatives of Spinning Tops: transform the Wa belief of “protecting the house with fungus umbrellas” into a smart home rotating ornament (with a built-in gyro motion sensing module), which automatically rotates to purify the air when the indoor PM2.5 exceeds the standard, thus realizing the practical transformation of cultural symbols.

3. System-technology-community synergy:

Formulation of “Yunnan Spinning Tops Living Heritage Protection Regulations”, clear timber concession logging quota, traditional techniques certification standards, the establishment of “Spinning Tops Cultural and Ecological Compensation Fund”, and ecological feedback to the raw material supply villages.

The establishment of the provincial “Spinning Tops Digital Creation and Research Center”, the research and development of AI auxiliary function, Spinning Tops movement mechanics simulation system, to reduce the threshold of inheritance of skills, and build a cross-regional inheritance community.

The theory of living heritage guides us: Protection is not about sequestration, but about activation through innovation (Zhang & Wang, 2025). Through the three-dimensional intervention of “genetic survival – functional reconstruction – institutional guarantee”, Yunnan Spinning Tops can break through the trap of “museumization” and realize the leap from “cultural heritage” to “living capital” under the framework of living heritage theory. The leap from “cultural heritage” to “living capital” can be realized under the framework of living heritage theory. Only by building a synergistic network of “genetic survival – technological innovation – institutional safeguard – community participation” can the Yunnan Spinning Tops continue to be better inherited and developed, and add color to modern society.

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