

# *A Research on the Paths of Rural Revitalization Empowered by Intangible Cultural Heritage—Take Rugao Puppet Show as an Example*

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**Abstract:** The rural revitalization is essential to national rejuvenation. The rural areas are not only the cornerstone of national development but also the roots of culture. Local culture, as the soul of rural areas, carries profound historical heritage and unique regional characteristics, serving as an indispensable support for advancing rural cultural revitalization. This paper takes Rugao puppet show, an intangible cultural heritage project in Jiangsu Province, as an entry point to deeply explore the unique value of rural culture, seek the convergence of traditional culture and modern society, and innovate a characteristic development path of “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, injecting new vitality into rural areas.

## 1. Introduction

In April 2022, during the inspection in Wuzhishan City, Hainan Province, the Chinese General Secretary once emphasized: “We must do a good job in inheriting intangible cultural heritage and effectively link the consolidation and expansion of poverty alleviation achievements with comprehensive rural revitalization”. This statement provides a reference for the inheritance and innovation of intangible cultural heritage in various regions. Simultaneously inheriting and innovating intangible cultural heritage while empowering rural revitalization not only lays the foundation for the prosperity and development of socialist culture with Chinese characteristics but also activates the internal cultural driving force for rural self-development, leading the new journey of rural revitalization in the new era. Therefore, against the backdrop of the rural revitalization strategy, intangible cultural heritage, as a treasure of Chinese excellent traditional culture, is gradually becoming an important force in promoting the comprehensive development of rural economy, culture, and society.

In the first batch of intangible cultural heritage list of Jiangsu Province, the Rugao puppet show, created based on local customs and practices, is included. This paper will explore the theoretical framework of intangible cultural heritage empowering rural revitalization, combine it with the specific case of the Rugao puppet show, analyze its current development status, inheritance

significance, and challenges faced, and then propose practical and feasible paths. The aim is to provide new ideas and references for the organic combination of intangible cultural heritage inheritance and rural revitalization.

## **2. Research Background**

### **2.1. Contemporary Demand**

In recent years, with the deep advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, people have gradually realized that rural revitalization requires not only "shaping" but also "soul casting". As an important pillar of excellent traditional rural culture, intangible cultural heritage embodies the rich nostalgia and memories of the Chinese nation. Whether it is the urgent need for industrial revitalization or the promotion of the trend of cultural and tourism integration, these factors have prompted further exploration of the value and potential of rural intangible cultural heritage in economic, cultural, and ecological aspects. The combined effect of these factors has made intangible cultural heritage play an increasingly indispensable role in rural revitalization.

### **2.2. National Policy**

With the convening of the 20th national congress, our country has further increased the importance of protecting and inheriting intangible cultural heritage. The report of the 20th National Congress pointed out, "Increase efforts to protect cultural relics and cultural heritage, and strengthen the protection and inheritance of historical culture in urban and rural construction" <sup>[1]</sup>. At the same time, the Central No. 1 Document also proposed: "Initiate the implementation of plans such as the cultural industry empowering rural revitalization, adhere to creative transformation and innovative development, deeply explore the value of intangible cultural heritage, find connection points between traditional culture and modern life, and be able to play the role of intangible cultural heritage in serving the contemporary and benefiting the people in promoting rural industry, talent, organization, ecology, and culture revitalization" <sup>[3]</sup>. The promotion of a series of policies has further strengthened the connection between rural revitalization and intangible cultural heritage, stimulated the vitality of rural development, and broadened new paths for rural revitalization.

## **3. Research Purpose and Significance**

### **3.1. Inheritance and Innovation of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

In the process of rural revitalization, intangible cultural heritage, as an important resource, has been widely disseminated throughout the country. More and more towns and villages have strengthened the promotion, protection, and development of local characteristic traditional cultures, bringing intangible cultural heritage into the public eye and enhancing the awareness of all sectors of society about inheriting intangible cultural heritage. As a result, intangible cultural heritage will also receive more financial support and social participation, thus achieving more effective protection and inheritance.

Moreover, the integrated development with rural industrial economy has transformed intangible cultural heritage from a static, sealed heritage into a "living source" driving rural development. In the context of rural revitalization, intangible cultural heritage continuously combines with new technologies, new industries, and new business forms, promoting the modernization, computerization, and networking development of intangible cultural heritage. For example, using digital technology to record and disseminate intangible cultural heritage, and utilizing e-commerce

platforms to sell intangible cultural heritage products, have injected new elements into intangible cultural heritage.

### **3.2. Empowering Rural Revitalization**

Through the excavation and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, the rural economy has also ushered in a "new spring". Various unique and charming intangible cultural heritages have not only enriched tourism resources for rural areas but also spawned related cultural and creative industries, providing more employment opportunities and income channels for villagers. This deep integration of culture and economy has not only promoted the optimization and upgrading of rural industrial structure but also enhanced the self-development capacity of rural areas, laying a solid foundation for the sustainable development of the rural economy.

On the spiritual and cultural level, intangible cultural heritage is the soul and foundation of rural areas, carrying rich historical memories and national sentiments. By protecting and inheriting intangible cultural heritage, rural areas have not only retained their local cultural characteristics but also enhanced villagers' cultural confidence and cultural identity. This awakening of the cultural genes inherent in villagers also helps to unite and cohere hearts, providing strong spiritual support for the harmony and stability of rural society.

## **4. Current Research Status on Intangible Cultural Heritage Empowering Rural Revitalization**

Currently, domestic and international theoretical research on intangible cultural heritage empowering rural revitalization mainly originates from the "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" proposed by UNESCO, which mentions that intangible cultural heritage is both a source of cultural diversity and an important guarantee for sustainable development. As sustainable development strategy is an important part of rural revitalization, the combination of intangible cultural heritage and rural revitalization has also received high attention and emphasis from domestic scholars. As of 2024, there are over 4,300 research papers related to "intangible cultural heritage" and over 280 papers on "intangible cultural heritage empowering rural revitalization" found on CNKI.

During these research works, a study by Mr. Liu Kuili, who is an honorary member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences proposes six viewpoints on the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage in the discussion on "Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Inheritance and the Process of Chinese-style Modernization" <sup>[2]</sup>: First, we should focus on intangibility, and be good at using deconstruction and structural methods; Second, we should focus on subjectivity. The normal interaction between "active subjects" and "audience subjects" is the core and complete process of intangible cultural heritage protection and inheritance; Third, we should focus on inheritance and protect the dynamic life of intangible cultural heritage well; Fourth, we should focus on spatiality and examine intangible cultural heritage in real life from multiple dimensions and holistically; Fifth, we should focus on practicality. Intangible cultural heritage protection and inheritance is a cultural practice; Sixth, we should focus on value orientation, explore and promote the rich emotional connotations of intangible cultural heritage. In addition, Liu Yuqing, a Ph.D. in Management from Nankai University who has published multiple first-authored articles on intangible cultural heritage inheritance in core journals, emphasized in her paper "Authenticity Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage and Tourism Development Boosting Rural Cultural Revitalization" <sup>[3]</sup> the importance of telling good local stories in rural intangible cultural heritage tourism development and making good use of cultural spaces in rural intangible cultural heritage tourism experiences. Currently, there are only 5 research papers on the "Rugao Puppet Show", among which only 2 involve the inheritance and protection of the Rugao Puppet Show, and none of

them are linked to rural revitalization.

## **5. Research on Rugao Puppet Show**

### **5.1. Introduction to Rugao Puppet Show**

The Rugao Puppet Show, one of Jiangsu Province's intangible cultural heritages, has a long history and has been active since the Jiangxi period of the Ding Dynasty. By the Guangxu period, the development of Rugao Puppet Show had expanded rapidly, evolving into various types of puppets, including rod puppets, hand puppets, string puppets and so on. Today, puppet show performances can still be seen in the Shuihuiyuan Scenic Area.

Rugao, located in the Jianghai Plain of the Yangtze River Delta, earns it the reputation of “Hometown of Puppetry” from the outside world. Influenced by the Jianghai culture, the rod puppets with distinctive Jianghai charm gradually formed, becoming unique in national puppet art and recognized as Jiangsu Province's intangible cultural heritage. The Rugao tourism puppet show has gradually moved from cities to towns and rural areas, becoming a popular folk performing art.

### **5.2. Survey on Rugao Puppet Show**

#### **5.2.1. Questionnaire Survey**

In order to look into people's understanding level of Rugao Puppet Show and their willingness to further understand it, the project team designed a questionnaire with 9 questions. The survey was conducted in paper form at five locations: Rugao Shuihuiyuan Garden, Changzhou Cultural Square, Xuzhou Fuguo Street, Yancheng Water Street, and Suzhou Pingjiang Historic District, during spare time and summer holidays. Simultaneously, an electronic version of the questionnaire was distributed online, inviting netizen to participate. A total of over 1,000 people were surveyed.

#### **5.2.2. Survey Results and Analysis**

After sorting and verifying both paper and electronic questionnaires, a total of 1,836 were collected, with 1,574 being valid. The results show that contemporary people are increasingly attentive to intangible cultural heritage, with 82.45% of respondents supporting learning, inheriting, and innovatively developing intangible cultural heritage. 78.23% of respondents agree with and are optimistic about the Rugao Puppet Show empowering local rural revitalization. People can learn about the puppet show through various channels (see Figure 1). In summary, it is evident that the Rugao Puppet Show, included in Jiangsu Province's first batch of intangible cultural heritage list, has great potential in empowering local rural revitalization. However, combining the statistical charts from the questionnaire (see Figure 2) and the actual field visits by group members, we also discovered some challenges currently faced by the Rugao Puppet Show in terms of inheritance and development, mainly manifested in: (1) Limited inheritance scope and narrow audience group. The Rugao Puppet Show is far more well-known locally than in other places, and slightly more renowned among middle-aged and elderly groups than among young people, indicating its audience is limited geographically and age-wise. (2) Lack of innovation in form and singular performance venues. The most widely known promotion of the Rugao Puppet Show is the free performances in Shuihuiyuan Garden, while the utilization of new media and on-the-ground promotion still needs improvement. (3) Shortage of reserve talents and crisis in inheritance. Research shows that the average age of the older generation of puppet show performers has exceeded forty, and the inheritance of the Rugao Puppet Show lacks young, vibrant performers to inject vitality. (4) Traditional performance concepts lacking contemporary aesthetics. The performance repertoire of

the Rugao Puppet Show is relatively outdated, lacking innovative performances that follow current trends and align with young people's mainstream aesthetics and artistic interests, failing to attract more fresh vitality.(5) Emphasis on theoretical content with a lack of practical experience. Most people's understanding of the Rugao Puppet Show usually remains at the theoretical stage without personal experience, lacking opportunities to appreciate the charm of the Rugao Puppet Show through practice. This indirectly reduces the radiating effect of the Rugao Puppet Show on local economy and culture.

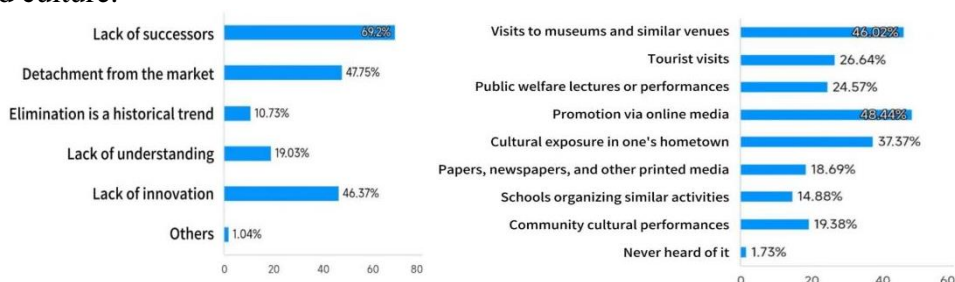


Figure 1: Channels to learn about puppet show (Left)

Figure 2: Factors Hindering the Development of Puppet Show (Right)

## 6. Specific Development Paths for the Rugao Puppet Show

Addressing the development bottlenecks in these aspects and the main pain points that prevent the Rugao Puppet Show from exerting its intangible heritage effectiveness, we propose to promote and publicize the puppet show, deeply explore its value, find connection points between traditional culture and modern life, and innovate a characteristic development path of "Intangible Cultural Heritage+" to promote the development of the Rugao Puppet Show. This approach aims to facilitate the five major revitalization of local industry, talent, organization, ecology, and culture, playing the role of intangible cultural heritage in serving the contemporary era and benefiting the people. Specific suggestions are as follows:

### 6.1. Intangible Cultural Heritage + Digitization

In the deep integration of intangible cultural heritage and rural revitalization, "Intangible Cultural Heritage + Digitization" demonstrates unprecedented vitality and potential. In line with the trend of the times, the Rugao Puppet Show is rejuvenated in the wave of Digitization. By utilizing modern technological means such as high-definition imaging, Virtual Reality (VR), and Augmented Reality (AR), the exquisite skills and moving stories of the Rugao Puppet Show can be presented to a global audience. This allows viewers to experience the charm of the Rugao Puppet Show impressively, enhancing the sense of immersion and participation. It ingeniously integrates the art form into modern digital platforms, not limited to just offline performance formats.

### 6.2. Intangible Cultural Heritage + Entertainment

Puppet-themed creative experience stores can be developed around historical and cultural sites and puppet theaters in Rugao. Additionally, DIY puppet-making activities and creative products can be offered. Furthermore, connect puppet shows with popular entertainment forms such as murder mystery games and escape rooms. . We can create puppet-themed murder mystery scripts or escape room designs and promote them through multiple channels to venues across Rugao. After discussion and planning, we have launched a murder mystery game themed "Twelve Puppets". This

activity uses the Rugao Puppet Show as a thread, incorporating elements such as background stories and performance styles of puppet shows. With promotion, it has great potential for development and popularity, bringing higher attention to the Rugao Puppet Show. Once the Rugao Puppet Show gains substantial public recognition, establish a Rugao Puppet IP and create classic puppet images. Popular bubble tea shops should be encouraged to collaborate with Rugao Puppets by offering complimentary Rugao Puppet cultural and creative products, as well as free murder mystery tickets. This approach not only drives consumption but also further increases its visibility.

### **6.3. Intangible Cultural Heritage + Education**

Efforts should be made to actively organize and conduct study tours related to puppet shows, with a focus on watching performances and engaging in hands-on puppet making. At the same time, students should be encouraged to participate in the creation and performance of puppet shows, with their achievements showcased through platforms such as campus art festivals and cultural festivals. This approach not only attracts more social attention but also stimulates young people's interest in puppet shows as an intangible cultural heritage, thereby better promoting and preserving the art form.

### **6.4. Intangible Cultural Heritage + Self-Media**

In the context of globalization, it is equally important for excellent Chinese culture to go global. In the process of international communication, short video social media can provide domestic and foreign users with a first-person perspective for cultural experiences. The engaging and fresh experience can inspire global audiences' sense of identity and participation in Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, we can leverage the enormous traffic of social media and e-commerce platforms, such as popular platforms like TikTok. By inviting inheritors of the Rugao Puppet Show and self-media personalities to present lively performances with bilingual introductions, the charm of puppet shows can be showcased to a global audience. Simultaneously, we can arrange for inheritors and representatives of local agricultural, cultural, and tourism products to join live streaming sessions. While they manipulate puppets and perform classic repertoires, they can intersperse introductions to Rugao's agricultural specialties, handicrafts, and rural tourism routes. This approach not only demonstrates Rugao's rich cultural heritage but also promotes its unique products to the world, becoming a link connecting rural areas with the global community.

### **6.5. Intangible Cultural Heritage + Tourism**

An intangible cultural heritage brand should be established, along with the creation of a new IP for the Rugao Puppet Show, linking it with Rugao's cultural tourism industry and agriculture to achieve industrial integration. This approach aims to attract more domestic and international tourists, thus promoting industrial revitalization. We can establish free, scheduled puppet theaters at historical and cultural tourist attractions in Rugao, such as Shuihuiyuan Garden, East Street, and the museum. By combining puppet show performances with the rural natural landscapes and folk activities, immersive tourism experiences can be created. Extensive promotion should be carried out through online media and other channels, enabling tourists to appreciate local Rugao puppet shows while visiting these scenic spots. This enables visitors to experience Rugao's scenic attractions and literary stories, further promoting the development of Rugao's cultural and tourism industry.

## 7. Conclusion

For national rejuvenation, rural areas must be revitalized. Local culture is the soul of rural areas and an important support for advancing rural cultural revitalization, as well as a significant force in aiding comprehensive rural revitalization. The Rugao Puppet Show, as a cultural medium, encapsulates local customs and integrates regional linguistic characteristics, conveying the spiritual and cultural power of a region and society. At present, people's emphasis on spiritual culture has brought unprecedented opportunities and development prospects for the inheritance of the Rugao Puppet Show itself and its empowerment of local rural revitalization. As a new generation of youth in the wave of comprehensive deepening reform, we should adhere to the creative transformation and innovative development of the Rugao Puppet Show, deeply explore its value as intangible cultural heritage, and seek connection points between this IP full of immense development potential and contemporary life. This will play the role of intangible cultural heritage in serving and benefiting the people while promoting comprehensive local rural revitalization, injecting youthful energy into cultural inheritance.

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