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Recognising menhu as a community within Wushu Intangible Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of the menhu in the protection of Wushu Intangible Cultural Heritage (WICH) and the possibility of developing it as part of WICH community, based on the analysis of the concepts of community in sociological theory, community in the Convention of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Menhu members master skills and enact their inheritance and reproduction for a long time and have a stable and continuous sense of identity in their inherited skills and cultural identity, thus constructing them as a cultural community. Menhu members always actively participate in the recognition, protection, and inheritance of WICH. However, due to the unclear identification of community entities and the criticism of the menhu as a negative culture in folk martial arts, its status and value have not been recognised in the protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), and the identity of its community entity has not been clarified. This paper argues that respecting the complexity of folk martial arts cultures, and establishing a community recognition system that aligns with the realities of WICH, expressing approval and emphasising the subjectivity of the menhu is of practical significance for ensuring the continuous inheritance and dissemination of WICH.

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Introduction

Community and community participation are key concepts proposed by UNESCO to promote the protection of Intangible cultural heritage (ICH). ICH is the value choice of a community, and its preservation and development requires the involvement and promotion of the community. Based on trends in community research on ICH in the international context, the community practice of Wushu¹ Intangible Cultural Heritage (WICH) has also attracted the attention of some scholars. Issues that concern researchers include who WICH community subjects are, and whether state policies have positively impacted the community protection of WICH. For example, Xing (2009) stressed that the government should not be assumed as the main body, but the power of civil groups should be relied on to ensure the long-term protection and reasonable utilisation of Chinese folk martial arts. Qu and Li (2012) take the provincial ICH of Hunan Province-Meishan Wushu as an example, and propose that it can be used as a community resource to promote the construction and development of community sports in Xinhua County. Xiang and Ba (2022) also pointed out that an urban community is the activity platform for representative inheritors of WICH; they can cultivate community inheritors through lectures and teaching activities.

Scholars of WICH community research generally regard traditional villages as subjects. In addition, some scholars propose that the menhu inheritance group is the subject for promoting

the inheritance and dissemination of WICH skills, but they have not conducted an in-depth investigation of the menhu as an ICH community (Lv, Li, and Peng 2020). It should be noted that the menhu, as an essential space for cultural inheritance and technical reproduction of Chinese folk martial arts (Dai 2013), is a noteworthy analytical perspective.

Menhu generally refers to an organisation formed by a group of folk martial artists who have been teaching, learning, and practising a certain type of boxing for a long time under the leadership of their master. Wushu projects, now recognised as ICH, are folk martial artists' skills preserved through different menhu. Existing research has not investigated the specific role of menhu in the protection and inheritance of WICH in China, and there is a lack of field investigation cases for analysis. Meanwhile, menhu has been controversial under modern discourse, and subsequently, the complex structure of group relationships and the competition and comparison between different menhu skills led researchers to consider it as marginal content in traditional culture.

For ICH, communities should directly participate in the entire process of creating, confirming, inheriting, and protecting skills. The involvement of community participation is directly related to the protection effectiveness of the project. This paper discusses the assumption of menhu as part of the WICH community to promote the improvement of the recognition system of WICH and try to enrich the connotation of ICH community in international conventions through community participation in Chinese practices.

The Sichuan province is rich in WICH resources. As of November 2022, two wushu projects from Sichuan Province were included in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, thirteen were on the provincial list, and more than forty in municipal projects. These include martial arts that are local, those introduced into Sichuan from other regions, and those after integration and regeneration, which provides abundant research objects for this article. From September 2020 to March 2022, the author conducted several field surveys on 14 WICH projects in Sichuan Province, including Emei Wushu, Qingcheng Wushu, Li Yaxuan Tai Chi, Emei Panpo Wushu, Lulin Wushu, Yang-style Tai Chi push hands,² and Zhao-style Wushu, covered those from national to municipal levels. This article takes the Sichuan Province's WICH projects as a case study to demonstrate and analyse the practical role of menhu in the protection and inheritance of ICH projects.

Historical development of the concept of community

In 1887, Ferdinand Tönnies made a binary distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), which initiated a discussion about the former as a normative academic concept. Tönnies claimed that a community was the incipient form of structures of social relationships. A group that lives together helps each other survive, has close relationships, and shares common customs and beliefs constitutes a community, and is based on relational structure, kinship, and emotion. The family is the most common representation of community (Tönnies 1999, 73–75). Thus, Tönnies believes that social integration and interpersonal relations form the core of the concept of community (CoC).

In the early 20th century, when sociology was introduced to the United States, 'Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft' were translated as 'community and society', increasing the scope of this form of organisation to a global context. Factors including 'location' and 'gathering point' have gradually become the key to defining and understanding community (Ding 1995, 55). The CoC and related research were introduced to China in the 1930s, and Chinese sociologists defined it as 'a community living collectively in a certain region' (Fei 1999, 22). For a long period thereafter, CoC remained within the realm of academic research. It was not until the 1980s that Chinese urban grass-roots organisations launched community services focused on the convenience and benefit of the people, and the concept of a community gradually came into the view of ordinary Chinese people.

In 1991, the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China proposed the construction of communities with local Chinese characteristics to help the government solve various contradictions that emerged during the social transformation period, such as the layoffs of workers after

the dissolution of the ‘unit system’,³ and the rise of the market leading to an increase in floating urban population. Therefore, community is constructed as an alternative to the unit system of the urban grass-roots management system (Yang 2007). In 2000, after promulgating the Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Promoting the Construction of Urban Communities in the country (Government of the People’s Republic of China 2000), communities officially assisted in promoting and developing social affairs in China as urban grass-roots management units. While the government leads community work, some residents are involved in community affairs due to their specific needs. These interactions between the state and the people from the community gradually promote the formation of community awareness among residents. Consequently, most Chinese people only understand community in the administrative sense.

In the community construction, different social regions have different community subjects. Specifically, community in China’s rural areas refers to administrative or natural villages, while in urban areas it refers to the area under sub-district offices or neighbourhood committees’ jurisdiction.

UNESCO has never defined community in any of its documents. However, existing research on ICH communities generally posits that intangible cultural heritage is a shared culture and skill within the community. This perspective intuitively presents the essence of an ICH community as a cultural community, that is, as a group sharing a spirit and culture in the sense of Tönnies, rather than ‘a grass-roots unit defined by the administrative system’ (Wu and Qin 2022, 135). However, because a general perception has been formed around the community as a grass-roots management unit in China, the ICH community and grass-roots management unit in China can overlap regionally creating conceptual entanglements between the two, constraining ‘the understanding and imagination of the community in ICH research and practise’ (Han and Gao 2020, 73).

The concept of community and community participation in the protection of WICH

During the author’s fieldwork on WICH in Sichuan Province, none of the inheritor voluntarily mentioned community. When asked about community inheritance, some questioned whether it was the community where they lived or the community where the project was located. This reflects the basic understanding of the inheritance group towards the participation of ICH communities. On one hand, they understand community as an administrative division; on the other, they have not realised the connection between their own *menhu* and the ICH community.

Wushu is a cultural pattern formed and developed in rural society. Therefore, scholars inevitably associate communities with traditional villages when discussing community participation in WICH. For example, Hu and Zou (2022) claim that Chenjiagou in Jiaozuo, Henan Province, is a relatively typical WICH community. Chen-style Tai Chi has long been integrated into local village life, and community members consciously protect and pass on this skill (Hu and Zou 2022). Yang and Liu (2021) also claim that Chenjiagou was a village community integrated through Chen-style Tai Chi as a ‘cooperative economic community network’ that drives its economic development. In addition, Tang and Li (2018) conducted field investigations and indicated that the community in Qianwei village, Guangzong County, in southern Hebei Province, actively participated in Meihua boxing and played a positive role in the construction of a communal cultural space in Qianwei village (Tang and Li 2018). In essence, a village community is a relational community developed based on geographical relations and a grass-roots community unit delimited by administrative management, typically characterised as an ICH community. However, attracted by the market economy and urban life, many wushu inheritors flooded into cities to seek job opportunities, gradually separating the inheritance of wushu from rural areas. Therefore, considering only traditional villages as WICH communities is ineffective.

However, ‘ICH into community’ (ICHIC) is an effective way for the government to promote the connection between ICH projects and the community. ICHIC is a themed activity hosted by the functional department of the grass-roots community. Its purpose is to allow residents of urban

communities to experience traditional culture and further understand these projects, while promoting community interaction and enhancing community cohesion. ICHIC activities are carried out in various forms, such as exhibiting ICH projects in the community, with project inheritors carrying out activities such as public welfare teaching.

The field investigation found that Qingcheng Wushu, Zhao-style Wushu, and Emei Panpo Wushu actively participate in ICHIC activities. The public welfare teaching course jointly organised by Qingcheng Wushu and Dujiangyan local community is a typical example of the ICHIC practice. In October 2022, the Qingcheng Wushu inheritance group participated in the Qingcheng Wushu Public Welfare Class, organised by the Ginkgo Street Community of Dujiangyan City (Figure 1), giving children living in the community a basic Qingcheng Wushu skills course. According to the inheritors, they will continue cooperating with other urban communities in Dujiangyan to teach Qingcheng Wushu. Xu and Hua (2019) indicated that providing compulsory guidance to citizens in the community space could transform some community residents into inheritors of wushu projects (Xu and Hua 2019, 82).

However, the concept of ‘community participation’ emphasised by UNESCO and the ICHIC proposed by China differ. The former refers to the community as the inheritor of ICH projects, and community members intimately participate in the process of heritage inheritance and protection (Chirikure et al. 2010); the latter transforms the community from a subject to a participant and promotes the joint construction and sharing of ICH projects among community residents through government management departments. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, we believe that the ICHIC proposal is an attempt by relevant government departments to apply the concept of an ICH community proposed by UNESCO to solve the problem of communities not being the main body in ICH projects, thus creating a community participation model with Chinese characteristics for ICH.

In addition, China is also actively exploring different ways of community participation and has proposed some more targeted guidance, to improve the system related to ICH protection. Article 6 of The Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage issued by the General Office of the State Council (2021) proposes to ‘Explore and identify representative inheritance teams (groups) for collective inheritance and public practice projects’. Article 7 clearly states that it is necessary to ‘improve the regional overall protection system’ and promote the protection and construction of ‘cultural ecological reserves’ and ‘villages and blocks with ICH



Figure 1. Qingcheng Wushu develops public welfare classes in the community. Source: Author.

characteristics'. These identification measures for communities and groups should be conducive to the community protection and inheritance of ICH projects, but this exploration is still in the preliminary stage.

Menhu: a community based on the master-apprentice relationship

ICH communities are seen to be limited to grass-roots communities in China in the context of community participation in the existing practical experience of WICH. However, returning to the original intention of the community, based on the natural inheritance system of folk martial arts, we have gained new theoretical space. Inheriting and disseminating folk martial arts inevitably refer to the menhu and the menhu inheritance group. Therefore, folk martial artists are also figuratively compared to 'martial artists in menhu' (Dai 2008, 67).

Menhu is a concept related to boxing skills and *liupai* of folk martial arts (Dai and Chen 2009). Specifically, *liupai* is a general term for a particular technique formed during the development of boxing. For example, as *liupai* forms, Tai Chi has Yang-, Chen-, Sun-, and Wu-styles, and menhu is the bearer unit of these technical styles. Combining multiple menhu practising the same boxing contributes to the formation of the *menpai* (Hou and Zhou 2016). Therefore, in the cultural tradition, there is a close connection between the classification of technical boxing styles and the menhu.

However, reviewing ancient texts indicates that early martial arts did not have concepts of menhu or *menpai*; instead, classification was based on knives, guns, swords, sticks, fists, and other weapons or methods of attack (Matsuda 1984, 3–4). In the Ming Dynasty, the originally rough and simple wushu skills began to be summarised and refined systematically, forming a technical boxing system with practical rules. Martial artists who refined these skills began naming these styles after their surnames, such as 'Yang-style Tai Chi push hands' or 'Zhao-style Wushu'. Cheng and Liu (1998) claim that this naming method, with its characteristics of patriarchal customs, represented the germination of Chinese martial arts as menhu consciousness (Cheng and Liu 1998). Therefore, the wushu skills mastered by each menhu gradually became the menhu cultural capital, and only menhu members were qualified to learn the skills. Thus, the 'master-apprentice relationship' naturally becomes the link of the menhu community, determines its basic form.

Menhu, however, is a group organisational structure based on the relationship between master and apprentice, with strong emotional belonging and cohesion. When discussing the social characteristics of folk martial arts apprenticeship system, Liu et al. (2021) pointed out that the core of the apprenticeship system is a 'cultural inheritance system'. The importance of the apprenticeship relationship is that it determines the responsibility and mission of the disciples to bequeath their skills. How the inheritance relationships of different ICH projects are established may differ, but establishing the relationships between masters and apprentices ensures that skills are circulated within a group. The continuation and inheritance of skills allow community groups to vitalise ICH (Zhu 2017). Therefore, 'there is no intangible heritage without intergenerational mentorship' (Song 2021, 109).

The relationship between master and apprentice holds the menhu together. This confirms the responsibilities and obligations of both parties in teaching skills, and the simulated kinship between master and apprentice wraps members into the 'human relations network' of the menhu (Zhou 2004, 587). This also means that the 'basic moral norms' of the menhu, such as 'follow the master's instructions' and 'respect teachers as fathers' can be effectively observed (Su, Zhu, and Li 2021, 68). A disciple resisting and questioning the master may result in extremely serious consequences. The familiar 'expulsion from the menhu' is an extreme manifestation of a disciple's 'social death' in this context. Such 'consistent group consciousness and norms' ensure that menhu members can achieve a division of labour and cooperation as a community, balance the distribution of benefits, and promote the inheritance and protection of the project (Yang 2014).

The critical influence of the master-apprentice relationship on the menhu community, creates a stronger cohesion of the community through a more stable master-apprentice relationship. In November 2020, the inheritance group of Yang-style Tai Chi push hands, a Chengdu municipal ICH project, organised a commemorative event on the hundredth birthday of Lin Mogen, the first-generation project master. The event lasted for three days and attracted more than 300 participants from all over the country to Chengdu (Figure 2). All participants were disciples of Lin Mogen or students of his disciples. Although Lin's disciples have spread throughout the country and gradually developed branches of inheritance relations, the events launched by Lin's menhu still unites members.

The integration of menhu is not only about the master-apprentice relationship, but also about the integration and cohesion of the members. Unlike communities structured by consanguinity or geographical relations within a certain region, menhu are initially composed of individuals with no social relationship. They usually come from all over the world and are neither siblings nor geographically related neighbours. However, after individuals became associated with a menhu because of their relationship with the master, disciples who practised and communicated with each other within the menhu gradually built an exclusive and closed cultural community. For example, Li Jianguo, the representative inheritor of Emei Panpo Wushu, once shared a typical example of in-depth communication between menhu members. A few years ago, Li's house had to be renovated, and Zhang Yuanyong, Li's elder brother in the menhu who operated an interior decoration company, offered to help. He arranged for workers to complete the house renovation without charging a fee. Li Jianguo claimed that such examples of assistance are common in their menhu. The field survey results in this study indicate that mutual assistance among disciples of a menhu is a particularly common aspect of WICH. Some disciples have gone beyond the brotherhood created by their apprenticeship, and become friends or relatives who personally support each other. From their inception, the relationship between master and apprentices connected practitioners who would otherwise have had no social interactions, and the mutual benefit and aid between disciples after entering menhu are deepened by their relationships, integrating them into 'one family' and 'one social unit' (Dai 2011, 139).

Additionally, practising and innovating skills are key factors in making menhu a cohesive community. As mentioned above, the basic function of the menhu is to promote the continuous production of wushu skills. As more practitioners join a menhu, the innovation of skills is no longer completed by the master alone, and the members share new experiences of practising skills and



Figure 2. Commemoration of Lin Mogen's hundredth birthday. Source: Author.

jointly promote the reproduction of skills that become one of the main modes to maintain its basic functions. Dai (2013) pointed out that menhu members continue to make a ‘differentiated production’ of skills, prompting the emergence of new experiences and new types of boxing. Through this path of collective innovation, the wushu skills preserved by the menhu are always in a virtuous development cycle. Menhu members jointly participate in the inheritance and reproduction of skills, which generates deeper spiritual and emotional experiences, creates a stronger sense of identity at the community level, and maintains and strengthens menhu from the ‘common functional needs’ (Yang 2008, 97). Therefore, from the perspective of ICH protection, menhu can be recognised as a community with a ‘common sense of belonging and identity’ formed by technical practice (ACCU, UNESCO 2006).

However, while the development of menhu has created boxing with different styles, scholars have also noted the negative impact of the long-term development of martial arts in menhu. As early as the Republic of China, some scholars found that inheritance groups of different menhu were prone to mutual jealousy (Li 1935). In the modern transformation of folk martial arts, menhu has been more severely criticised by scholars as a major obstacle affecting the form’s transformation (Li 2001; Li and Shen 1999). According to them, the presence of menhu kept folk martial arts in a state of closed propagation for a long time. This conservative attitude led to the mystification and exaggeration of menhu skills (Li, Wang, and Zhu 2013). Simultaneously, a psychological perception among menhu inheritance groups that their boxing skills are superior has also developed, leading to conflicts between different groups (Wang and Guo 2013). These studies demonstrate that menhu points to the backward culture of folk martial arts, and scholars have a strong critical consciousness while discussing it.

The discourse of ‘negating traditional culture’ has a profound historical origin in China, which gradually formed during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China and reached its peak during the New Culture Movement. During this period, intellectuals were eager to cater to Western values and wanted ‘the classical tradition of China to withdraw from its original central position’ (Yu 1997, 171). For example, Chen Duxiu summarised that ‘to support science, we have to oppose old art and old religion’, which is a representative of intellectuals from that time (Chen 1984, 317). Under the trend of embracing rationalism, cultural content related to tradition was labelled old, regressive, and unscientific. This widespread criticism of traditional culture has significantly impacted future generations’ cognition, with folk beliefs, traditional skills, and other content in folk culture becoming the main indicators of ‘regressiveness’. Opposing content that does not conform to modernity and rationalism in traditional culture is seen as a symbol of progress. Therefore, when dealing with menhu, most researchers firmly believe that only eliminating the menhu can promote the progress of folk martial arts. Meanwhile, menhu is regarded as the discourse background of backward culture, which is related to the cognition of the WICH group on their identity status. Therefore, when folk martial arts are officially recognised as ICH, the inheritance group is also afraid to declare their identity as members of the menhu and cannot sincerely express their true representative culture.

Menhu: the main body of protecting and inheriting WICH

As the basic social unit of wushu, menhu have been involved in protecting WICH, and its importance is primarily reflected as follows. First, the declaration of WICH is always connected with a specific menhu. For example, Chen Longxiang and Li Mindi, the representative inheritors of Li Yaxuan Tai Chi, applied to recognise it as ICH. They are Li’s disciples and second-generation inheritors of Li’s menhu. In addition, Tujia yumen boxing was recognised as ICH under the guidance of its inheritor. Before its recognition, Tujia yumen boxing had been passed down through the family of Ding Yaoting, the representative inheritor of the project, for more than a hundred years. The recognition of these WICH was completed by the main inheritors and disciples of a certain menhu, indicating that the menhu members were the first to realise that their inherited skills have ICH value.

As most entities recognised as part of the WICH are declared by a menhu, a very interesting phenomenon occurs, where two wushu traditions with the same skills and designation, but developed in different regions, are simultaneously recognised as ICH. For example, Li Yaxuan Tai Chi and Yang-style Tai Chi push hands, both Yang-style, are examples of wushu from the same style applying for recognition and protection as ICH projects via different menhu inheritors. In this regard, some wushu researchers have questioned and criticised the inclusion of similar types of boxing into the ICH list as confusion caused by 'different evaluation criteria'. However, this paper argues that this confusion only demonstrates that the protection afforded by an ICH designation concerns the community, and its members who protect and inherit these skills. Article 21 of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China stipulates that 'the same intangible cultural heritage project, whose form and content remain intact in more than two regions, can be included in the national intangible cultural heritage representative project list at the same time' (Government of the People's Republic of China 2011). Therefore, although some boxing skills can be classified as the same style, as long as they are maintained and protected by different inheritance groups, they can legitimately apply for ICH recognition. Actively applying for ICH recognition from different menhu reflects their desire to obtain official recognition and seek legal identity for the inheritance group and its protected skills. The intervention of ICH helps to establish the inheritance group's subjectivity and make it re-recognise the value of its own culture. However, although individual inheritors in the menhu were identified as representative inheritors, the menhu did not gain legitimacy.

Second, the community value of the menhu is also reflected in the inheritance process of the project, and they are the primary participants in the inheritance and dissemination of WICH. Under the leadership and organisation of the master, the members of the menhu 'interact in a quasi-familial manner', divide and collaborate, and jointly complete the inheritance and dissemination of WICH (Dai 2008, 86). For example, the inheritance and teaching activities of Emei Wushu in Emeishan City were carried out by the representative inheritor Wang Chao and some of his disciples. In general, Wang would first convene these disciples to instruct them, standardise movements, unify the methods used to teach movements, and then assign them to inheritance sites in Emei City for instruction. This mode of joint inheritance and practice by the master and some core menhu members is also a feature of other projects, including Qingcheng Wushu, Emei Panpo Wushu, and Yang-style Tai Chi push hands. For national ICH projects such as Emei wushu and Qingcheng wushu, the specific inheritance activities of some sites are undertaken independently by a disciple designated by the master, and some are given the title of representative inheritor, because of the large number of inheritance sites. For example, Wang Yao and Luo Liangyou are recognised as the municipal representative inheritors of Qingcheng Wushu (Dujiangyan City), implementing inheritance activities in Qingcheng Longqiao Wushu hall.

Simultaneously, the common disciple group also significantly impacts the inheritance of projects. The common disciple group primarily refers to disciples with no right to speak of the project and ordinary participants in menhu activities. Although this group is not directly responsible for the inheritance of skills and it is not easy to gain the title of the inheritor, its members are also skilled. Therefore, as these disciples move from place to place, they carry their boxing knowledge and skills to new places and spread its branches. For example, the disciples of Lin Mogen, the first-generation master of Yang-style Tai Chi push hands spread throughout the country. His disciples and those taught by them have grown to the thousands, spreading this culture to different cities in China.

Ma (2022) more precisely pointed out that the breadth of community participation is directly related to the sustainability of an ICH, and it is insufficient for representative inheritors to participate in the projects' inheritance and development. These discussions have raised the role of the 'disseminator' of an ICH to a more prominent position.⁴ During the fieldwork, it was found that while carrying out the external inheritance practice of Qingcheng Wushu, teaching activities inside the menhu continue, where the representative inheritor trains all disciples willing to participate (Figure 3). Reflecting that inheritors unconsciously view all disciples as 'inheritors', more disciples

will positively impact the inheritance of a project. If menhu is regarded as the most basic community unit of WICH, then under the synergy of the menhu inheritance group, this unit can also connect a larger community, involving more diverse subjects in the project protection. These diverse communities are often indispensable for the inheritance of ICH. Whether an ICH project can be completely and effectively inherited must and can only be truly realised by relying on the community.

The community responsible for the inheritance and dissemination of WICH are menhu members, naturally connecting them with the benefits of ICH protection. Through the policies and measures formulated by the government, the menhu members of WICH projects can benefit from many aspects. For example, representative inheritors receive direct inheritance subsidies, like in the Sichuan Province. Representative inheritors at different levels can receive annual subsidies ranging from 3,000 to 20,000 yuan from municipal, provincial, and national cultural departments. The higher the level, the greater the corresponding subsidies. Additionally, menhu members participating in ICH exhibition activities and inheritance teaching of projects can also bring them considerable income. Some benefits are also difficult to quantify, such as when a project has established a heritage site with well-equipped facilities in good condition due to government support or when the status and reputation of inheritors and a project are improved because of its ICH recognition (Figure 4). Subsequently, the recognition of ICH improves the living standards of menhu members, strengthens their internal cultural identity, and makes them true beneficiaries of ICH protection. Menhu members become the main stakeholders in protecting WICH, another manifestation of the menhu as the main body of practice.

The above analysis and research based on field investigation indicates that WICH is a skill inherited by the menhu, and it plays an indispensable intermediary role between the history and modern development of wushu. However, as this article has always stressed, the current identification system of ICH inheritors is not based on the overall identification of a community but is represented by a very small number of individuals. This is not conducive to the sustainable development of the project. In fact, the author has found negative impacts of the lack of community recognition policies during the investigation. For example, the representative inheritor of Lulin Wushu is now carrying on the inheritance independently in Wenjiang District, Sichuan Province. In the view of other menhu members, he has only studied skills with the previous generation of menhu inheritors, but his skill is far from representing the whole project. As a result, the officially identified representative inheritor has become isolated due to the loss of contact with his menhu inheritance group. Without the community, this WICH skill will likely be alienated and eventually die out.



Figure 3. Internal disciple training for Qingcheng wushu. Source: Author.



Figure 4. Mount Emei Buddhist Association provides a heritage site for Emei Wushu. Source: Author.

Discussion

Although UNESCO stresses the importance of community participation in ICH protection, considering the cultural differences in different regions, these conventions only provide a core spirit. The specific content of ICH community protection still needs to be formulated and elaborated by each country according to its own needs. Based on the analysis and reflection of existing research on the WICH community, this paper argues that ‘menhu as a community of WICH projects’ provides a case to understand and explore the reality of diversified communities and promote the improvement of communities and their protection systems.

The ‘community’ of ICH protection refers to the group directly involved in a project’s inheritance practice and regards that project as its culture. In this sense, ‘community’ is ‘an expression of the group’s different manifestations in different contexts’ (An 2016, 76). Regardless of the folk martial arts in the natural inheritance period or the WICH officially recognised at present, menhu is the ‘smallest unit’ to implement protecting and inheriting the project (Wu 2017). The relationship between master and apprentice is the menhu structure’s foundation. Disciples learn skills and communicate under the leadership and organisation of a master, making the menhu a group organisation with clear boundaries. The master and apprentice jointly promote the inheritance and reproduction of wushu skills and culture, and the relationship and mutual benefit of menhu members, further consolidating and maintaining the menhu structure. Therefore, scholars claim that menhu still plays an irreplaceable role in inheriting wushu skills and maintaining the emotions of the inheritance group (Hua and Dai 2020). These objective facts clearly outline the basic characteristics of the menhu as a community, demonstrating that it is more qualified to be recognised as a WICH community that includes the ‘widest possible participation’ through the projects’ inheritance and dissemination (UNESCO 2006). In the scope of WICH, although the community protection proposed by UNESCO is not equivalent to menhu protection, considering menhu as a community aligns with the development of wushu and a community protection mode, highlighting the characteristics of Chinese folk martial arts. This paper argues that menhu is a community of WICH projects, which is a framework of community participation interpretation that fits Chinese and folk martial arts practice, and emphasises that the understanding of the WICH community must be placed under the folk martial arts inheritance structure to achieve results.

However, the discussion and analysis presented in this paper illustrate that there are challenges to recognising menhu as a community within WICH projects.

First, due to the administrative application of community in Chinese society, both urban and village communities are generally regarded as the subject of ICH community. However, the grass-roots community are not skill holders, and cannot directly participate in protecting and inheriting WICH as inheritance subjects. The interaction path between the grass-roots community and the ICH project created by ICHIC activities enables some community residents to participate in the protection of ICH. However, it does not mean that community participation in ICH is realised. If the specific direction of the community in the WICH cannot be precisely defined, community participation can only rely on the support of local governments to maintain superficial activities without any practical significance.

Second, the value and status of the menhu as a core inheritance group have not been recognised and institutionally guaranteed. The core of ICH protection is to respect the differentiated cultures and values created by human beings. Therefore, the list system does not exclude the existence of any special cultural inheritance groups instead identifying various types of communities and putting them on the list as far as possible. However, ICH protection in China is affected by the 'regressive culture' issue. Therefore, although menhu is indisputable as the actual community of folk martial arts, it is labelled as regressive, and its uniqueness and value for the inheritance of WICH have not been recognised, weakening its cultural identity.

Simultaneously, China's ICH representative list is still based on the identification of individuals, and the practice of group identification is relatively slow. In response, some scholars have proposed that the ICH community can be identified as a group established through professional ties (Song 2022). Alternatively, complete skills can be subdivided, and inheritors can be recognised according to the skill's sub-item (or process link) (Ma and Chen 2022). However, these group identification concepts have not caused major repercussions or further policy adjustments.

Menhu originally existed as a whole community inheritance, but the intervention of ICH protection limited the representativeness of the skills and the resources provided by the government to few members in the menhu, reducing the participation of other menhu members. Therefore, we also need to worry that the internal conflicts caused by ICH will damage the inheritance of skills.

Since ICH is a cultural project that incorporates ethnic and folk culture into national civic education and community identity, the cultural phenomena that exist in traditional culture should be fully accepted and respected. As Gao Bingzhong pointed out, ICH protection is a rare opportunity for traditional cultures marked as regressive to be re-recognised (Gao 2007).

From the perspective of ICH protection, the role of menhu is crucial for the inheritance and reproduction of martial arts skills and in the communication of inheritance groups, making it an inseparable part of folk martial arts. This determines that WICH is a typical cultural form that relies on a menhu, and the menhu has all the basic conditions to be recognised as a community. Therefore, we believe that empowering menhu with a legitimate community identity through the ICH institution is not only a joint agreement between the government and the folk martial arts inheritance group to ensure the development of the project but also an effective way to stimulate public recognition of traditional culture.

Conclusion

The discussion of WICH communities is part of a larger debate on modernising folk martial arts. Protecting WICH entails reasonably defining community and promoting it to play a leading role in protecting wushu projects. ICH is the knowledge system, emotional values, and cultural traditions primarily created and shared by people of different regions and nationalities. Therefore, we cannot separate the inheritance ecology of folk martial arts when researching the WICH community.

Community 'refers to people who directly or indirectly participate in the implementation and inheritance of the relevant intangible cultural heritage project and agree that the project is a part of

their cultural heritage' (Yang 2016, 71). Observing and analysing the characteristics of menhu and their role in the practice of ICH inheritance indicate that menhu is a group structure based on the relationship between master and apprentices. Learning activities and interaction between members in menhu build them into cultural communities with clear boundaries. Wushu skills are the cultural heritage jointly created, continued, and inherited by menhu members. More importantly, it is the main beneficiary of the protection of WICH. Therefore, menhu constructs the skills, culture, and inheritance system of folk martial arts into a complete community.

While protecting WICH projects, practical problems include unclear community subject orientation and a lack of reasonable group identification system. This paper argues that recognising 'menhu as a community of WICH projects' is an attempt to address this protection dilemma. The identification system is an important institutional guarantee for the ICH movement. Through this system, menhu is endowed with the legal identity of ICH communities to provide the community with a legal survival guarantee while clarifying their rights and obligations to enhance the sense of responsibility and mission of the community. This paper argues that respecting the complexity of traditional culture and establishing a community recognition system in line with the realities of WICH can promote the sustainable development of the project.

Notes

1. Wushu is the Chinese appellation of Chinese martial arts; wushu and martial arts are both expressions of Chinese martial arts. In the study of Chinese martial arts, scholars are accustomed to using 'Chinese folk martial arts' or 'folk martial arts' to refer to traditional forms of martial arts; for example, most WICH projects are folk martial arts. Wushu is a more extensive term, which can represent both traditional and modern competitive forms of martial arts.
2. Tai Chi push hands is a bare-handed competition between two practitioners. It is a movement that uses Tai Chi skills to make the opponent's body lose balance by attacking their upper limbs and trunk.
3. The 'unit system' refers to the organisational form established by the People's Republic of China in 1949 to manage personnel within the public ownership system. A unit can ensure that a Chinese person receives a stable economic income and has an organisation that safeguards their legitimate rights and interests. Therefore, competing for decent unit has become a central issue for every Chinese person attempting to settle down under the old system. See Yang and Zhou (1999, 4–5).
4. Yin and Yu (2008) believe that the cultivation of disseminator of ICH is an effective supplement to inheritors. Disseminators have no restricted inheritance qualifications: 'As long as they are willing to learn and master an intangible cultural heritage', they can become a member of the inheritance group (Yin and Yu 2008, 187).

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