



The elderly, children and volunteers are watching shadow play.

The Power of Cultural Inheritance

How did a Once-Dying Folk Art Reinvigorate a Remote Village in Northwest China

by Project partner | **無止橋** 慈善基金
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Note from the Editor: Community culture plays a pivotal role in rural development and often serves as a significant starting point of the efforts in this respect. The inheritance of community culture, benefiting people in an invisible manner, is no less important than infrastructure improvement that brings tangible fruits. This is especially true for a village in northwest China: a traditional folk art has been reborn due to a field research interview, which in turn gives a new life to the village.

How did a Once-dying Folk Art Reinvigorate a Remote Village in Northwest China

Huining County of Gansu province, located on the ancient Silk Road, had seen the exchange and integration between the culture of the Central Plains and those of Northwest ethnic groups. Despite the prolonged drought and infertile soil, it is a place rich in history and culture.

A time-honoured cultural heritage hidden in a northwest village

Macha Village, located in the south of Huining County, is adjacent to Anding District and Tongwei County of Dingxi City. Shadow play, an ancient folk art, had been celebrated here for over a millennium.

Shadow play, also called *dengxi* in some areas, was performed on special occasions, such as temple fairs held during Spring Festival or at other festivals, and gatherings to celebrate elder people's birthdays. Not only did it entertain gods and people, in particular, in a time with fewer entertainment options, it also took on great significance in education. In Huining, shadow play, along with other folk arts such as Qinqiang Opera, *Shehuo*, and ditty, has maintained the stability and continuity of the local rural community.

In recent years, however, in the wake of rapid urbanization, traditional culture has seen its influence fading away and lost much ground to modern media like TV and smartphones. Shadow play has been no exception. In Macha Village, the local shadow play troupe was dismissed in early 1990s because of the falling au-



diance, the little infusion of fresh blood to the troupe, and the increasing number of master puppeteers who chose to work in cities. An ancient folk art disappeared from the barren Loess Plateau.

Rediscover the lost treasure

In 2016, the Macha Village Centre, which was built with the assistance of Chan Cheung Mun Chung Charitable Fund and Wu Zhi Qiao (Bridge to China) Charitable Foundation ("WZQ Foundation"), came into use. In a field research interview conducted subsequently in the village, the villagers happened to reminisce about the traditional culture that used to be celebrated locally, such as Qinqiang Opera and shadow play. At the end of the sharing, the community workers were recommended to visit the former head of the local shadow play troupe.

After the interview, the community workers visited Mr. Wang, the only successor of shadow play in Macha Village in his late 60s. While excitedly recounting his experience of shadow play inheritance, Mr. Wang reopened his prop box untouched for over 20 years to show visitors the exquisite shadow puppets. It had been his concern that there would be no successor of his shadow puppets, and he hoped that shadow play could be passed down in his lifetime.



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1. Shadow play is an ancient folk art. It not only entertains people, but assumes great significance in education as well.

2. Mr. Wang, the only successor of shadow play in the village, is displaying a shadow puppet.

A performance leaving the audience in awe

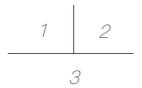
At the invitation of the community workers, Mr. Wang embarked on finding the scattered members back to reunite the troupe. After a long hibernation, shadow play was coming back to life in Macha Village. Upon learning the news of the troupe's comeback, villagers showed up with their children to watch the performance. The multi-purpose hall of Macha Village Centre was teeming with audiences.

Before the performance, Mr. Wang dusted off his prop box and hung the silhouette puppets up backstage. When the gong and drum were played and the lights on, the shadow puppets once again flitted across the translucent screen.

In celebration of the opening of Macha Village Centre, the troupe made its debut with "Da Xiang Shan", a mythology depicting the religious practice of Avalokitesvara. One after another, the mythological figures appeared on the screen and came alive for the audience, who were watching intently in awe. In a divine atmosphere, the flitting shadow puppets evoked the audience's spiritual world and comforted the local gods who had protected and accompanied generations for over thousand years.

The performance was on for two consecutive days, which allowed the elderly to conjure up images of the bustling old days, the middle-aged to recall the

joyfulness of enjoying shadow play in childhood, and the youth, fascinated by its novelty, to discover surprisingly a cherished art in their own hometown. Children also sat in front of the screen, concentrating on the shadow puppet show which, though looking similar to animation, is the forerunner of movie.



1. Mr. Wang is taking shadow puppets out of the prop box in preparation for the performance.

2. Shadow play in performance.

3. The troupe members are backstage.



Changes coming with the revival of shadow play

The comeback of shadow play energizes Macha Village and allows the elderly once again to have confidence in traditional culture. In the past three years, Mr. Wang and other local elderly residents have been striving to revitalize dying traditional culture in the village, such as Qinqiang Opera, dizzy, and Lion dance and managed to gradually increase performance opportunities for the performers. Thanks to their efforts, young people start finding interest in shadow play: Mr. Wang has started taking apprentices and the passing down of shadow play sees a ray of hope. Meanwhile, Mr. Wang's efforts in cultural inheritance have won him praise and reward from the local government.



Volunteers of WZQ Foundation visit Mr. Wang and learn details on shadow puppets.

Shadow play as a cultural bridge

In Macha Village, the comeback of shadow play not only promotes local cultural revitalization, but builds up a cultural bridge between volunteers from mainland China and Hong Kong as well. Over the past three years, groups of volunteers from mainland China and Hong

Kong have visited the village, listening to the story of shadow play inheritance and watching the show together. In doing so, they immerse themselves in an environment with different cultures, which enables them to explore the charm of cultural diversity and find their interest in

an ancient folk art. This process, meanwhile, also sees the integration between tradition and modernity, the Mainland and Hong Kong, and village and city.

Cultural inheritance as a rural development approach

According to statistics, as of 2020, 40 intangible cultural heritage items in China has been included on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Chinese shadow play was inscribed onto the list in 2011. Besides, there are 1,372 national representative items of intangible cultural heritage across the country, among which most are preserved in rural areas. These items, scattered and hidden in villages, not only have technical, artistic and tourism values, but also play an irreplaceable role in community governance – including encouraging mutual assis-

tance in neighbourhood and developing community norms, custom, and values, which are significant inherent elements that maintain the sustainable rural development.

Community culture plays a pivotal role in rural development and often serves as a significant starting point of the efforts in this respect. The inheritance of community culture, benefiting people in an invisible manner, is no less important than infrastructure improvement that brings tangible fruits. Cultural continuity can

influence every aspect of a village, from neighbourhood relationship, community cohesion and the village's history to villagers' education and their confidence in development. It is therefore important to rediscover the hidden and lost cultures and, racing against the clock, help those elderly people knowing such cultures pass down their knowledge in communities, as well as show the intrinsic values of these cultures. These efforts play a paramount role in sustainable rural development.

Keywords: shadow play, traditional culture, intangible cultural heritage, cultural inheritance, sustainable rural development

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