

The Spectacle of the Sacred: Intangible Cultural Heritage and Visual Governance in China

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Abstract: This paper investigates the transformation of China's ICH through a visual governance lens, finding a tripartite field of tension between state, market and community. With the Wuwei Lantern Festival as the example, mainly the Balifish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern in Wuwei County. The research shows that the parametric discipline of state power and the impoverished semiotic discourse of market forces together lead to the reduction of living ritual into spectacle, forming a paradoxical situation of "preserving the appearance but erasing the spirit". On the contrary, it also highlights the resilience of communities – specifically how local artists embody their own topological resistance through embodied knowledge and adaptive actions. It is ultimately posited that good safeguarding necessitates collaborative governance to generate "cultural folds," or institutional spaces of negotiation, to facilitate cultural reproduction from a community perspective in the face of spectacle-making.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage; Visual governance; Cultural resilience; Spectacle; Cultural folds

I. Introduction: The Visual Governance Turn in Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection

A. Research Origin

The global safeguarding of ICH is going through a transformation from community-based transmission to state-driven visual governance. As for China's adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), an institutionally established system has been constructed by means of national inventorying systems and officially recognized inheritors (Gao and Zhao, 2014; Fang, 2020). Though it improves the legibility and visibility of heritage for administration, it has triggered reflections on the "materialization paradox of ICH", which means that living, dynamic practices of heritage become preserved only as static

material objects, losing its spiritual essence and social context.

A very typical case is the transformation of "shen-inviting" ritual (referred to as "huishen" in Wuwei dialect) in the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern tradition. Dougang Board Dragon Lantern is one of the two main parts of Wuwei Lantern Festival along with Bali Fish Lantern, both of them carry the worldview and community ethics of local agricultural community. Based on documentary materials and field investigations, it can be known that the old Dragon burning on February 2nd ceremony had a complete process of worshipping and sending off deities, which is the main carrier of local community identity. But after the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern was added to the Anhui

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Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2017, it stopped performing the main dragon burning ritual because of control requirements, and both the appearance of the dragon lantern and the way it

performed also had visual transformations, and only the parade performance was left. This change from faith practice to visual performance is a typical case of visual governance.

Table 1 From Ritual Practice to Visual Governance: The Materialization of Two Core Traditions of the Wuwei Lantern Festival

Category	Traditional Ritual Practice (Documentary Evidence & Empirical Research)	Changes After ICH Certification (2010s - 2020s.)
Dougang Board Dragon Lantern (Anhui Provincial ICH, 2017)	Complete process of the “huishen” ritual: After the parade, presided over by specific ritual performers (Taoists in the early stage, and senior family craftsmen in the later stage), following the core links of “inviting deities, worshipping deities, burning the dragon, and sending off deities”. The dragon lantern was carried to the shallow beach downstream of the village river, where rice wine and glutinous rice cakes were offered to the river god before burning the dragon lantern. Villagers scrambled for the falling dragon beards (colored paper tassels outside the bamboo frame) to pray for exorcism and blessings. The ritual embodies the local people’s awe of nature and deities (Qian, 2013; Qian & Dong, 2013).	Static parade performances are only held at designated venues such as the town cultural square and Jiuzi Ancient Town; the core “dragon-burning and deity-sending” ritual has been completely canceled due to “fire safety” and “scale control”; to enhance visual impact, the dragon body has been lengthened from the traditional 48 meters (19 sections) to 99 meters (still 19 sections, with each section doubled in length), requiring 30 young and middle-aged people to carry it instead of the traditional 15. Observations during the 2023 Spring Festival show that during performances, the background music is played, and LED spotlights are installed on the dragon’s head to highlight the “photographic effect”.
Bali Fish Lantern (National ICH, 2010)	Complete ritual cycle of “lighting lanterns, consecration, performance, and sending off deities”: including four core links of ancestral worship in the clan hall, eye-dotting consecration, village-wide parade, and burning the fish lantern to send off deities. Among them, the eye-dotting consecration must be carried out in a specific order accompanied by blessing mantras. Each link is closely related to local clan ethics and agricultural beliefs, forming a complete cultural practice system (Qian, 2013; Qian & Dong, 2013).	Only the “fish lantern dance” performance link is retained, and the movements have been standardized into fixed routines; core rituals such as “eye-dotting consecration”, “ancestral worship in the clan hall”, and “burning to send off deities” have been deleted. LED light strips are used instead of the traditional eye-dotting method to enhance the visual effect, stripping the spiritual core and cultural context of the ritual, presenting the characteristic of “preserving form while erasing spirit”.

Note: This table systematically compares the core ritual connotations and practical forms of the two core traditions of the Wuwei Lantern Festival before and after ICH certification, with relevant details verified by historical documents and empirical surveys (Qian, 2013; Qian & Dong, 2013).

The folk beliefs contained within the traditional “Dragon Burning on Feb. 2nd” ceremony that is central to the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern which is one of the major parts of the Wuwei Lantern Festival have become a stylized performance after the ICH inscription. This is structurally analogous to the ritual changes in South Korea’s Gangneung Danoje Festival, where the creation of a fixed inventory makes these changing, belief-bound practices rigid and static visual markers. The above phenomena expose the inherent contradiction of “institutional disenchantment” in the safeguarding of ICH, i.e., administrative

rationality dissolves the original cultural logic by symbolic extraction and scenographic discipline.

Under the background of revitalization of the Chinese countryside, contradictions are becoming more acute. The cultural-tourism authorities establish the cultural-symbols’ hierarchical system by the governance of inventory-certification and ecological-protection-zone. But a cognitive gap remains between the technical-rationality of the administrative discipline and the experientially-lived logic of community transmission. The Bali Fish Lantern, which represents one of the two pillars of the Wuwei lantern festival and reflects the conflict (Table 2).

Table 2 From Sacred Rite to Governed Asset: The Transformation of Communal Meaning in the Bali Fish Lantern (Core Component of the Wuwei Lantern Festival)

Ritual Stage	Sub-Event	Corresponding Cosmological Perspective	Simplification Post-ICH Designation
Lighting the Lanterns (Kāi Dēng)	Ancestor Worship (Commencement, Congregation, Worship, Illumination)	“Correspondence between Heaven and Human”; lineage solidarity	Government-advocated performances eliminate congregation and worship segments; timing flexible for holidays.
	Consecration (Kāiguāng)	Auspicious spatial beliefs; “ritual animation of objects”	Eye-dotting (Diǎnguāng) with rooster blood deleted; replaced by LED effects.
	Inviting the Deities to the Altar	“Revering the divine and seeking blessings”	Incense altar setup and communal wine-drinking eliminated.
Lantern Performance	Acrobatic/Patterned Displays	Animism; “perpetual vitality”	Procedure preserved but symbolic content hollowed out.
	Village and Household Tour	Divine protection; Confucian reciprocity	Reciprocal gifting and labor division deleted; performances streamlined.
Concluding the Lanterns Ceremony	Deity Send-off (Sòngshén)	“Divine-human symbiosis”	Entire ritual eliminated; lanterns no longer burned.

Annotation: Detailed breakdown of the Bali Fish Lantern’s traditional “Lighting-Playing-Retiring” cycle, a core part of the Wuwei Lantern Festival.

Its originally integrated ritual cycle fully displayed the cosmology of “Pray for prosperity, entertain the gods, welcome good fortune, and see off the ghosts” in the Yangtze fishing farming civilization. However, during the ICH nomination process, only the dance-oriented “lantern playing” element was kept, and only this element made it into the national-level representative list, which was affected by the performance-oriented criteria of the Chinese State Council’s Traditional Craftsmanship Revitalization Plan (State Council, 2017). Keeping the form of keeping form and spirit, this kind of modification is just like South Korea’s Gangneung Danoje Festival’s removal of symbols, and through the use of stage props and acting training makes rituals into tourists’ performances and disassembled traditional narratives.

B. Theoretical Framework Construction

This paper takes “visual governance” as the main ideological thread and creates a very comprehensive theoretical analysis system to clarify the hierarchical relationship and the same

goal of the three big theories, not just to put on top of the different views of different scholars. The core logical chain is as follows: Cultural ecology theory is used to lay the analytical base of “context – practice”, and to reveal the root causes of the “deracination” of the cultural genes of Wuwei Lantern Festival (Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern); Collaborative governance theory is used to analyze the interactive mechanism of various subjects, and to explain the formation mechanism of visual transformation; Technical philosophy criticism is used to expose the essence of cultural alienation under the collusion of capital and technology. These 3 theories can be seen as progressive and ideologically connected theory as ‘theory to visual governance mechanism of wuwei lantern festival and cultural effects’.

(1) Cultural ecology theory (Steward, 1955): the basic situation. The core concept of this theory is the symbiosis of culture with the local social-ecological environment. This means, with this

research we can see that the national certification system uses standardized measures to remove the Wuwei Lantern Festival, the Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern from their agricultural civilization context, such as the solar terms rhythm or clan network, so the Wuwei Lantern Festival (including the Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern) has been “rootless”. It gives a main premise to be analyzed afterwards, when culture has been detached from its original ecology, it becomes easily governable and changeable, which forms an ironclad ideological “cause-effect” relation with technical philosophy criticism, and it’s the basic layer of this theory.

(2) Cooperative governance theory (Yang & Wang, 2025; Yao, 2025): It undertakes the second-level analytical study of each party’s interactions, and it also focuses on a number of places, which is the point of the subject’s game. Based on the “stripping context” presented by cultural ecology theory, this paper uses the theoretical framework of cultural ecology theory to point out that the visual change of the Wuwei Lantern Festival is not a unidirectional “imposition from administration”, but a negotiated collusion between three parties, namely the state (the power of administration), the market (the power of capital), and the community (the inheriting subject). This theory not only makes up for the shortcoming of cultural ecology theory’s neglect of “subject initiative”, but also provides a “multiple subject” theoretical perspective for criticizing technical philosophy, thus making the transition from front to back in ideological theory.

(3) Technical Philosophy Criticism (Marcuse as cited in Kleinberg, 2021), which serves as the main critical element, with its main idea being the exposure of the decay of humanistic values brought about by technical rationality. Under the “context foundation” of cultural ecology and the subject interaction” of

the Collaborative Governance of this theory directly targets the end cultural effect – Wuwei Lantern Festival ritual is taken by capital and technology to be separated from its people into a stranger “one-dimensional” visual show. This theory is exactly opposite to the “Culture - Ecology Symbiosis” theory in cultural ecology theory. It fully demonstrates the ideological chain of “Context Removal - Subject Game - Cultural Alienation”, and it constitutes the critical layer of the theoretical framework.

The above integrated framework makes “the essence of cultural alienation under visual governance” the unified core ideology, breaks the binary opposition of “protection and development”, and places the practice of Wuwei lantern festival (such as the Bali Fish lantern and Dougang board dragon lantern) in an overall theoretical analysis chain. In terms of factual evidence, the cancellation of the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern “Dragon-burning Ritual” proves the core argument of the cultural ecology theory on “stripping the context of solar term beliefs”, and it is also consistent with the “interactive logic” of “administrative - community negotiation” in collaborative governance theory, and finally leads to the critical conclusion of technical philosophy criticism on “the spirit is dissolved by visual technology”. Three theories are interrelated in terms of ideology and closed-loop in terms of logic to support the main conclusion of this research.

II. Theoretical dialogue: The triadic tensions of cultural governance

A. Modernization of the State: The Cultural Cost of Parameterized Discipline

Modernizing state governance, especially by ICH certification systems, deploys technical rationality to dismantle the ecological context of heritage via what we can call “standardization violence”. This

governmental technique alienates living cultural practices into quantifiable and manipulable metrics, constituting a current form of Michel Foucault's "disciplinary power" in the cultural heritage sector.

The case of Xuan paper making can be cited in such a way. The national standards (such as GB/T 18739-2008) which have imposed on the industry with rigid ratio requirements of raw materials and physical performance standards, have led to a systematic exclusion of the artisans' "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi, 1997). This kind of know-how that was handed down from one generation to another and is made of tiny, sensory-based changes that happen because of changes in things like the temperature of the water and how much water there is in the air. (Stiegler & Ross, 2010; Zhou & Huang, 2024). The standard's call for a uniform tensile strength and pH level has thrown off the traditional craft's give-and-take with the natural surroundings – it matches Bernard Stiegler's "tertiary retention alienation" (Vidauskytė, 2015): when an artisan's body and perception get paired up with making things gets swapped for following "computable data modules," the very world of that craft gets torn apart.

Jingtai Lan (Cloisonné) case also shows the cultural cost of standardization. To satisfy market and GI protection requirements, the established protocols include exact formulas for enamel hues and dimensions of the metalwork (Zhang, 2017). The "hand" of the craftsman, as Hang (2020) put it, once a freely mixed combination is locked in place, it no longer follows the tradition. The original Cloisonné making "craftsman's intuition" has been abolished. This is in accordance with Frow's (2017) criticisms on heritage commodification by standardising it for the market rather than cultural authenticity (Taecharungroj & Prasertsakul, 2023).

It has resulted in a decline of the old, lucky appearance of "running colors". The replacing

of living art by machine-made sameness is the technological autonomy expressed by Jacques Ellul, in which technology itself perpetuates and thereby weakens the ontological basis for local knowledge. In essence, the parameterized governance of state projects is carrying out a kind of coding violence on cultural genes. And as Marcuse pointed out, under the circumstances, when technological reason eats culture diversity, "Affirmative thinking" appears, the unmeasurable spiritual value will have its systematic decay (Liu, 2000).

B. Semiotic Impoverishment: Visual Reconfiguration of Consumer Markets

Intangible Cultural Heritage is experiencing a process of "Aura Dissipation" in the consumer market, a process foreseen by Walter Benjamin's analysis of mechanical reproduction. E-commerce platforms abstract traditional craftsmanship into decontextuted commodities by means of generic "ICH" labels and thus systematically substitute symbolic meaning with sign value in the postmodern semiotic economy (Utopia & Khairussalam, 2023). A reduction of meanings and associations; B) a reduction of symbols and symbols; C) a reduction of symbols, semiotics and cultures.

1. Flattening Collapse of Semantic Systems

The rich traditional craftsmanship semantics network is reduced to visual consumption symbols. Take the intricate patterns of Miao embroidery, which contain myths, lineages, and prosperity wishes, and often get sold online as "ethnic-style" decorations. Simplification reflects trends in 2021 China Intangible Cultural Heritage E-commerce Development Report (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences et al., 2021), consumers' searches and platforms' algorithms prefer visual distinctiveness (e.g., "blue calico," "Yun brocade pattern") to cultural depth or techniques. When complex symbolism is dumbed down into an "exotic" visual

label, ICH becomes just a footnote to Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle".

2. Culture's Disembedding in Transnational Design

Globalized design systemically breaks the link between cultural signifiers and signifieds. For example, Uzbek Ikat textile patterns, signifying tribal identity in Central Asia, are taken out by luxury brands and applied to clothes without any original meaning, called "cultural appropriation", and West African Adinkra symbols (e.g. "Sankofa", meaning "learning from the past") used globally as just graphics only for their looks (Lenzerini, 2011). Such design essentially transforms ICH into "Othered" symbols under a postcolonial consumer logic and turns local knowledge into portable "cultural specimens".

3. Homogenizing Violence of Digital Acceleration

"Tyranny of Instantaneity" on short-video platforms tears apart the spatiotemporal wholeness of ICH. Top performing ICH-related videos (often with millions of views) according to the 2022 Short Video and Intangible Cultural Heritage Communication Report (Zhang, 2024) are under 30 seconds of "satisfying" process shots such as pouring molten metal, making paper cuts, with no mention of years of training or cultural context. This dual spatiotemporal deconstruction (time compression and space fragment) turns ICH into "calculable cognitive fast-moving goods", which is an echo of the critical concerns on "algorithmic cognitive colonization" where cultural memory is reconfigured as "interface-ized signs".

C. Localized Survival: Community-based Cultural Resilience

Faced with institutional systems and market forces, ICH carriers construct cultural resilience via the embodied cognitive topology and ecological covenant networks – which may be called "topological resistance", a non-linear survival strategy based on differential repetition. This

resistance takes place on two main fronts:

1. Topological Continuity of Embodied Experience

The practice of Longquan celadon firing reflects the preservation of a living transmission by means of an uncodifiable, sensorial knowledge. Master artisans have that sense, like "Dragon Kiln" how it is fired and they are doing important temperature changes based on flames colors and sound of wood, it's something you can learn for decades as an apprentice. This haptic and visual intelligence is a cognitive firewall to mechanical reproduction. Market pressure to be efficient, and yet artisans still keep their work shed times open, following their old kiln fire's rhythm, adjust when necessary, keep what makes it theirs. Resist the possibility in every day.

2. Elastic Networks of Ecological Covenants

Miao Silver Ornament forging in Guizhou's survival shows strong collaboration: silver miners/suppliers, master forgers, and locals work together, especially during festivals and weddings when silver ornaments are still an important way to show their ethnic identity. Suppliers supply silver that can be used in Miao designs and community demand maintains the specialization of artisan skills. This trilateral negotiation between material, technique, and socio-cultural function creates a resilient buffer (Shandidy, 2023). When made outside this eco-covenant for generic tourists, ornaments lack deep cultural meaning. This makes "local knowledge" vital. ICH cuts out survival spaces through such entangled practices in techno-capitalist colonization (Kurin, 2004).

III. Thick Description: Wuwei Lantern Festival's Semiotic Biography

The contemporary change of Wuwei Lantern Festival, which relies on the two most important cultural traditions, the Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern, presents a "disjunctive genetic renewal model," which is subject to the visual

disciplinary order of the state certificate system, and local cultural memories are reconstructed as “hyperreal signifiers,” proliferating signs, thus resulting in “formal conservation but spiritual estrangement” of cultural genetic recombination.

A. Cultural Deconstruction Through Spatial Reconfiguration

Tilting lantern ritual for ICH-themed galas and

performances moves Balifishlantern and Dougang boarddragonlantern from village temples sacrosanct to state-authorized hall of performance and forms three pieces:

1. Formal Discipline’s Semiotic Violence

Traditional lanterns are affected by stage aesthetics with a systematic distorted morphological ratio (Table 3).

Table 3 Morphological Transformation of Core Lanterns in the Wuwei Lantern Festival

Lantern Type	ICH Designation	Pre-ICH Certification	Post-ICH Certification (≈ 2018)	Post-ICH Certification (≈ 2024)
Bali Fish Lantern	National ICH (2010)	120 × 30 cm	130 × 40 cm	200 × 50 cm
Dougang Board Dragon Lantern	Anhui Provincial ICH (2017)	19-segment body (48m total)	19-segment body (99m total)	19-segment body (99m total)

Compiled from 2019–2023 empirical research.

Dougang Board Dragon Lantern is stretched from 48m to 99m, this shows that a spatial discipline as the operation logic similar to Foucault is applied to “spatial disciplining apparatuses”. As cultural symbols of the Wuwei Lantern Festival are absorbed in national narrative systems, their physical form is also submitted to scale discipline by the visual authority. Such formal mutations are a form of a “spectacularized social mechanism” on the small scale that replaces the topological relationships of holy spaces with mass-produced, self-referential clusters of visual signs.

2. Ritual Disenchantment by Programmatic Abstraction

Diánguāng’s tradition eye-dotted—it has

always gone from eye, scale, body, mouth, tail—but is now reduced to photovoltaic excitement. Meanwhile dance movements became technocratic: what were once improvised transitions and rhythms (dancers communicating with God in their own way) have become codified as twelve standard “Kinetic Algorithms” (fixed sequences, placements, durations). The transformation of embodied memory to replicable technical modules, in other words, this is the validation of Ellul’s critique that technological autonomy reduces the human-divine covenant to a one-sided visual display (Figure 1).

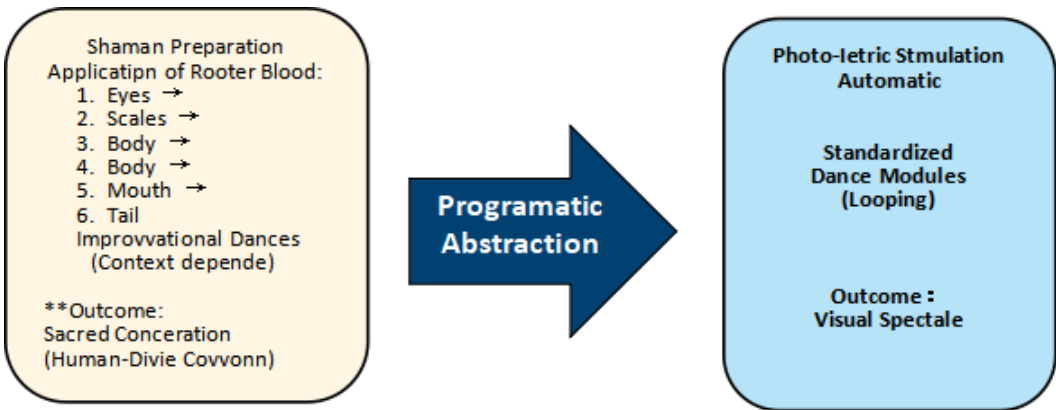


Figure 1 The Abstraction and Simplification of the “Diánguāng” Ritual (Core of the Wuwei Lantern Festival)

Source: Illustrated by author based on ethnographic descriptions in Qian (2013).

3. Mnemonic Disintegration via Material Transmutation

The change from bamboo and cotton paper to the modern textiles and synthetic paints (Table 4) in Bali

Fish Lantern is an example of Benjamin's "disappearance of aura". Not even tech, it is an even bigger game of how crafts remember and tell the truth (Figure 2).

Table 4 Material Transmutation of the Bali Fish Lantern

Craft Process	Traditional Materials	Currently Used Materials
Fish Bone Binding (Zhā Yúgǔ)	Bamboo strips, leather twisters, iron wire, hemp rope	Bamboo strips, leather twisters, iron wire, cloth
Fish Body Mounting (Biǎo Yúshēn)	Cotton paper, paste	Paper, paste, bone glue, cloth, white latex, universal glue
Coloring (Cǎihuì)	Mineral powder (red), ink	Colored paper, textile paint, acrylic paint
Lighting Installation (Zhuāng Dēng)	Candle, iron frame, cloth	Lamp, wire, iron frame, cloth, tape

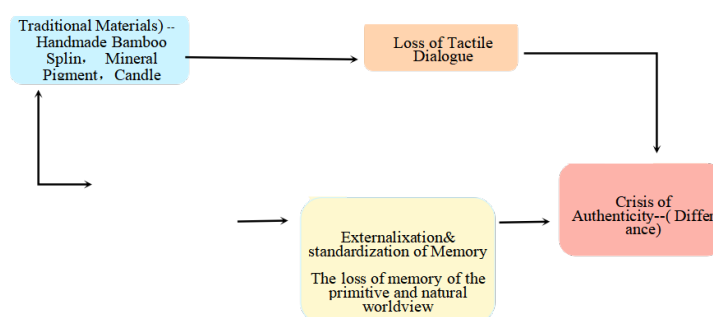


Figure 2 The Chain of Effects from Material Transmutation to Mnemonic Disintegration in the Bali Fish Lantern

Source: Author's conceptual framework based on empirical observations (2023).

This is material alienation, it is Stiegler's "organological externalization of memory", the disconnection of artisans from their locally sourced materials causes the Bali Fish Lantern's cultural authenticity to be thrown into crisis of *différance* (Derrida), the craft is now meaninglessly deferred and not grounded in bodily creation (Berg et al., 2010).

B. Dual Reconfiguration of Administrative Certification

The ICH certification system is reconstituting the ontological basis of the Wuwei lantern festival

through the mechanisms. Dougang Board Dragon Lantern's change from a clan, cross-village collaborative network to a linear state-certified genealogy validates Foucault's governmentality. In the past, it relied on non-linear synergies of clan esotericism, master-apprentice system and co-creation of the community. administrative certification imposed a kind of complexity into an arborescence (tree-like) structure centered on chosen transmitters (Figure 3).

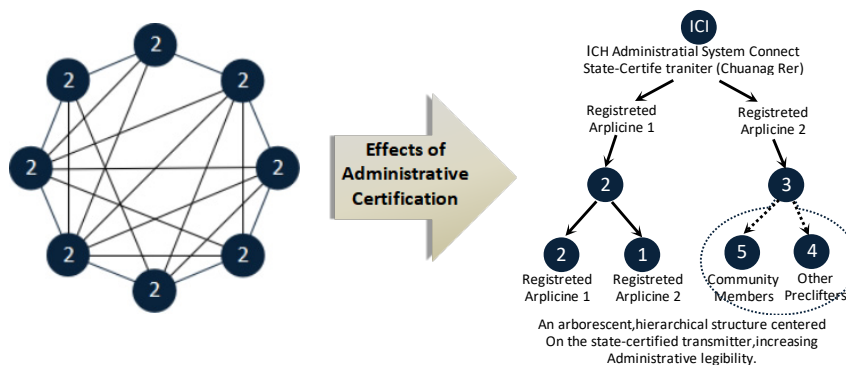


Figure 3 Reconfiguration of the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern's Transmission Model under Administrative Certification

Source: Author's analysis based on the inheritance history of the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern.

This certification-induced structural reconfiguration not only adjusts the festival's operational mode but also triggers a chain reaction of cultural alienation, profoundly altering the Wuwei Lantern Festival's inherent spatiotemporal attributes and semiotic connotations. Specifically, this alienation manifests in two interrelated dimensions.

1. Spatiotemporal Alienation of Performative Fields

As the core carrier of the festival's cultural meaning, the performative field undergoes fundamental transformation under certified structural reconfiguration, with its original spatiotemporal order disrupted. This disruption is prominent in both temporal and spatial aspects.

(1) Temporal Dimension. The lantern ritual, originally aligned with agrarian rhythms (e.g., Spring Prayer, Autumn Tribute), has been compressed into 20–30 minutes fragmented performances for tourists. This chrono-

fragmentation severs the ritual's connection to its original temporal context and erodes the temporal depth required for intergenerational cultural transmission—subtle skill and meaning inheritance depends on sufficient time accumulation.

(2) Spatial Dimension. Corresponding to temporal fragmentation, the festival's spatial practice is drastically alienated. The 19-village Dougang Board Dragon Lantern—originally a mobile ritual space connecting villages via circumambulation—has transformed into a scenic-stage symbol, marking a fundamental rupture in its traditional form (Figure 4). The sacred village circumambulation (which united communities, worshipped ancestors, and prayed for blessings) has been replaced by a consumption-oriented visual coordinate system, reducing the festival's profound cultural values to capital-driven dimensions and turning the sacred ritual space into a commercial venue.

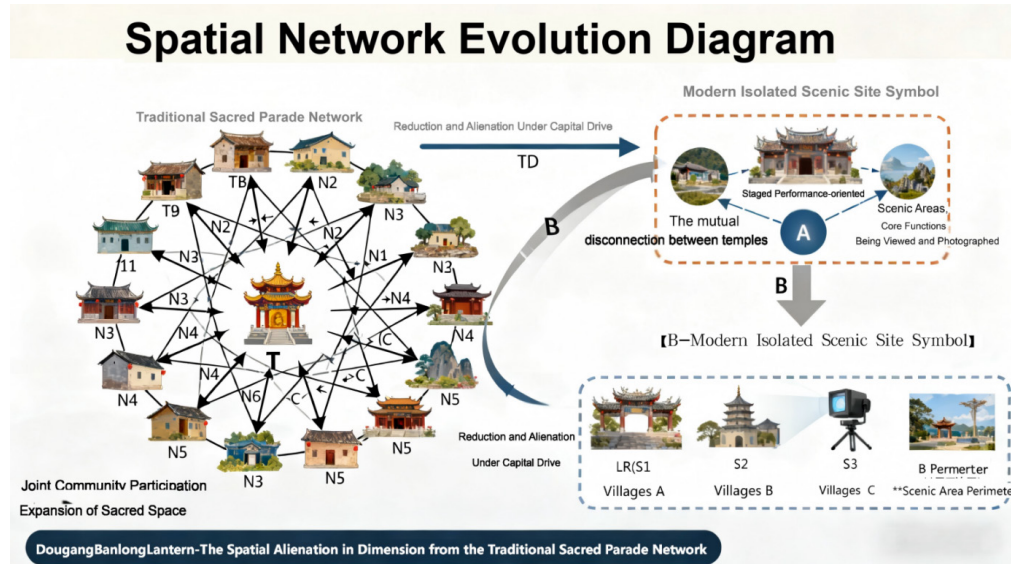


Figure 4 Spatial Alienation of the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern: From Traditional Sacred Parade Network to Modern Isolated Scenic Symbol

Source: Author's mapping based on historical records and empirical surveys (2023)

2. Cognitive Collapse of Semiotic Systems

If spatiotemporal alienation of the performative field is the external manifestation of certification-induced cultural changes, the cognitive collapse of the semiotic system is its internal core. Capital

logic leverages certification-driven structural reconfiguration to implement cognitive colonization via a “semiotic discount mechanism”, diminishing the festival’s cultural depth and reducing it to consumable signs. This colonization manifests

in three key aspects: (1) Semiotic Dimensionality Reduction. Intricate craft philosophies (e.g., “three pauses, nine similarities”) and cosmological symbols (e.g., “dragons’ flaming pearl”)—carrying craftsmen’s wisdom and traditional worldviews—have been simplified into batch-reproducible visual modules or commodified as standard IP products. This dimensionality reduction strips the semiotic system of its cultural depth, turning it into a superficial commercial visual symbol. (2) Cognitive Evaporation of Collective Memory. The festival’s semiotic system is intertwined with community collective memory, as motifs encode ancestral aspirations (longevity, progeny, prosperity). Under the “semiotic discount mechanism”, these motifs are stripped from ritual contexts and flattened into superficial “auspicious sign bundles” (embodying Benjamin’s *Aura-Verlust*), retaining only decorative and commercial value. Consequently, the collective memory carried by the semiotic system fades, weakening community cultural identity. (3) Entertainment Transcoding of Sacred Narratives. Sacred narratives (myths, legends, ancestral stories) embedded in the lantern ritual are the semiotic system’s spiritual core. However, stage adaptations (e.g., *Dragon Gate Leap*) disassemble ritual practices linked to these narratives into discrete consumable signs. This spectacular consumption distorts the original meaning of sacred narratives and erodes the ritual’s sacredness, completing the semiotic system’s cognitive collapse.

C. Administered Adaptation: The Schism of Cultural Praxis under ICH Frameworks

The ICH designation imposes an administrative logic that fractures the integrated cultural praxis of the Wuwei Lantern Festival into manageable units. Communities develop a “schizophrenic strategy of administered adaptation” to navigate competing demands of authenticity and spectacle—leading to

a fundamental schism in the cultural field.

1. The Spatial Schism: “Archival Sanctuary” vs. “Spectacular Frontstage”

Under the ICH system, space is strategically partitioned to serve distinct administrative goals, resulting in a dualistic landscape for the Wuwei Lantern Festival: (1) Archival Sanctuary: Spaces like the Xinmin Village Ancestral Hall are designated as “authentic specimens” to satisfy ICH “original ecological form” criteria. Rituals such as *Diǎnguāng* are preserved as static artifacts, transforming the ancestral hall from a communal practice site into a legitimizing backdrop for administrative reporting. (2) Spectacular Frontstage: In tourist zones like Jiuzi Ancient Town, the Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern are repackaged for public consumption—performances feature technological enhancement and narrative simplification, designed to fulfill visibility and economic deliverables mandated by cultural tourism policies.

The coexistence of these two spheres embodies the administrative schism. The “spatial guerrilla tactics” of the communities is an adaptation to the state-imposed spatial order that puts cultural legibility and utility above organic integrity. Specifically “archival sanctuaries,” like ancestral halls, are being used to meet the requirement for an “original ecological form” but spectacular frontstages in touristy areas are being used to meet visibility and economic goals.

2. Craft Genes’ Modern Transformation: Technical Prosthetics with Dual Aspects

Under the Traditional Craftsmanship Revitalization Plan, the artisans of Wuwei Lantern Festival are performing “tech-adoptive praxis” (iron wire for cotton paper rope, synthetic pigments for discontinued alkaline ones). It is important to keep

certain key elements which are very symbolic, such as Bali Fish Lanterns, iconic 8 kinds of fish sequence each decorated with “Tools of the 8 Immortals” that can relate to local stories and universe. This is a “techno-semiotic symbiotic network”, where tech serves as a prosthetic for cultural survival – it maintains the structure for performance and guarantees its cultural legitimacy with the ICH regime.

IV. Collaborative Governance Innovation of the Wuwei Lantern Festival from a Visual Politics Perspective

A. Wuwei Lantern Festival development’s latent logic under visual political scrutiny

The safeguarding of the Wuwei lantern festival is basically a semiotic sovereignty contest held in the visual-political venue. Development path shows 3 intersecting logics – state institutional disciplining, market-semiotic extracting and community adaptive resilience – form the dynamic substratum for collaborative governance innovation.

1. Governance Tensions in State Institutional Disciplining

State’s construction of cultural legitimacy through codification of visual order, studied under Foucault’s “governmentality” shows three dialectic tensions of Wuwei Lantern Festival:

a. Confronting Standardizing Gaze and Ecological Wisdom

Under the ICH certification, parametric regulation of Dougang Board Dragon Lantern’s materials is a spatial performance of Foucauldian panoptic governance. and yet, it certifies a looking-out from standartization without making bamboo selections, which brings inheritors inside the logic of bureaucrats. Principles such as “bamboo not exceeding three years,” which originated from pre-beginning of

summer harvesting cycles and pest control ecological wisdom, are recast as “authenticity performances” to obtain administrative certification. This removes cultural indeterminacy and accelerates Benjamin’s Aura-Verlust: When bamboo’s ecological essence has been checked off in checkboxes of use applications, Wuwei Lantern Festival’s rhythm to nature is broken (Flatley, 2009).

b. Contestation between Spectral Discipline and Faith Adaptation

The government’s imposed lighting safety standards squelch the traditional Wuwei lantern festival’s “pyro-spiritual mediation system” (fire as human-divine mediator). Communities make small changes: there are LED strips alongside the dragon’s spine in places where the ritual really takes place and lotuses shaped candle holder can also exist. And it forms a “spectral negotiation interface,” the contemporary photoelectric system is subjected to an institutional disciplinary order, while the candle maintains the conservation of “primitive cognate schema.” This reveals a spatial-political form is exposed that necessitates a “cultural fold” , flexible buffer zone that lies in solid institution.

c. Mechanical Time Folded into Ecological Rhythms

The state-imposed “institutionalized performance cycle” such as the 15-day exhibition of the 2024 Spring Festival is in contrast to the community’s lunar agricultural calendar-based Wuwei Lantern Festival (Figure 5). Though there are disjunctures (official closure on the 5th day, community reactivation on the 8th) but they become an elastic symbiosis, the administrative structure as a protective scaffold and the community guards the “mnemonic genetic chains” of agrarian civilization with the seasons.

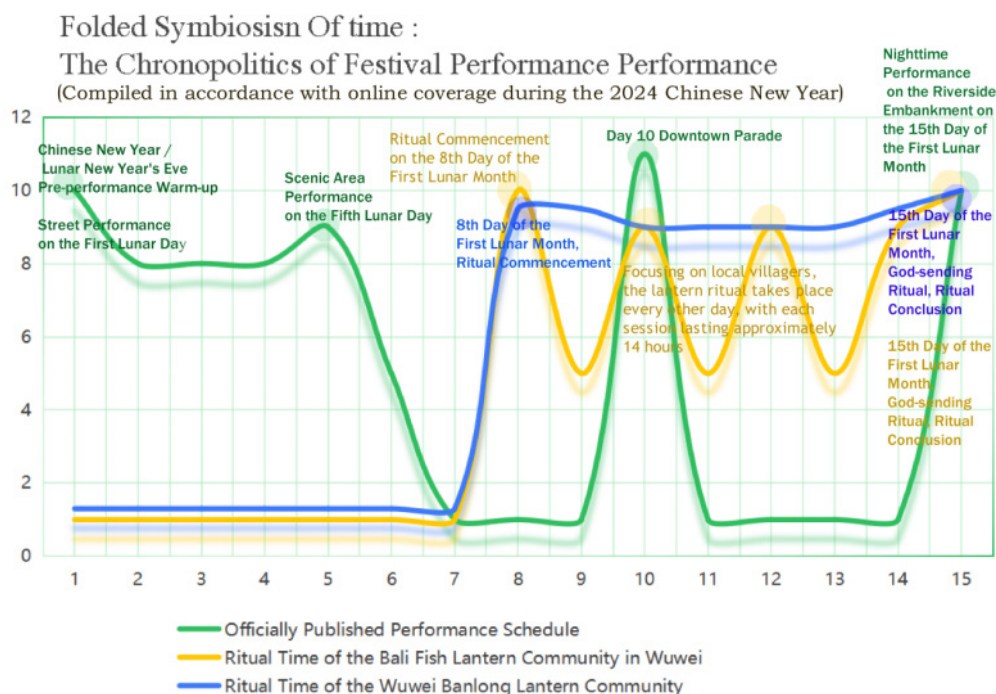


Figure 5 Folded Symbiosis of Time: The Chronopolitics of Wuwei Lantern Festival Performances

Compiled in accordance with 2024 Spring Festival online coverage and community ritual records.

2. Semiotic Politics under Market Circulation Relations

Capital's restructuring of ICH fields is realized by way of a double dialectic of cultural semantic disintegration and re-enchantment within "semiotic value systems" of the Wuwei Lantern Festival.

a. Disenchantment-Reenchantment Paradox of Semiotic Extraction

Wuwei lantern festival symbol circulation on e-commerce sites like Taobao is contemporary Aura-Verlust. "Carp Leaping Through the Dragon Gate" ritual symbolism is simplified to "generic ICH sign packages," capital's disenchantment becomes a process of "semiotic discounting." When geographical particularity of Wuwei Lantern Festival is concealed by capital, authenticity accountability is evaded and consumable mystique is manufactured: semiotic surplus value is extracted without cultural transmission responsibility.

b. Ephemeral Gaze and Deep Decoding Reconciliation

The temporal compression of short-video

platforms and youth-led "counter-encoding projects" related to the Wuwei Lantern Festival. Like Bilibili creators slowly deconstructing Bali Fish Lantern craftsmanship which are "guerrilla decoding tactics". When algorithmically curating spectacles as spectacles become gates for technical cognition of Wuwei Lantern Festival, instant consumption paradoxically resists Stiegler's "attention economy" - digital natives rebuild "deep cognitive topologies" via "techno-embodiment pathways", constructing resistances to the capitalist discipline cracks.

3. Adaptive Logic of Community-based Transmission

Community actors of the Wuwei Lantern Festival exhibit adaptive wisdom through "technological pleating innovation" and "ritual density compensation":

a. Technological Pleating of Haptic Memory

Dougang Board dragon lantern's innovations of 'dragon body mounting' are technoco-cultural symbiosis. This demand for cotton paper and hand-painted dragon scales constitutes a resistance to

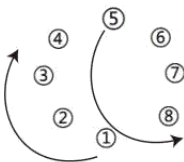
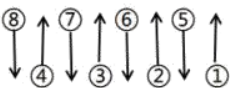
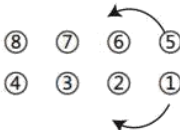
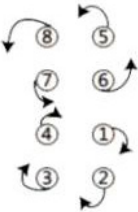
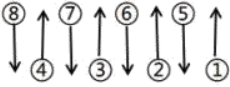
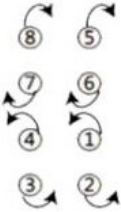
the semiotic violence of mechanical reproduction. Acrylic pigments and mineral dyes coexisted, traditional cosmology such as “Wuwei Lantern Festival Five Elements Symbiosis” embedded into the modern production networks, to form “techno-organic resilience.”

b. Density Politics of Ritual Temporality

The Bali Fish Lantern’s “three-hour performance innovation” is a “semiotic density engineering” of symbols through layered movements like “Daoqian Deng – Tuan Tao,” where communities inscribe the agrarian cycle, ecological

ethics of the Wuwei Lantern Festival (Table 5). In a compressed form of cultural connotations within the ritual moves, compensating for the loss of ritual time, the core ecological wisdom (e.g., the respect for the seasons), and ethical values (e.g., clan solidarity) are thus preserved in the context of spectacle driven time fragmentation. For example, “Tuan Tao” movement keeps the visual display of fish lanterns circling, and adds the collective memory of clan together praying for a good harvest, achieving “differential repetition” of cultural genes in adaptation.

Table 5 “Daoqian Deng – Tuan Tao” Perspectives on Ecological Ethics

Dance Unit		Schematic Diagram			
Daoqian Deng	Dance Step Breakdown Chart				
	significance	Yearning for Freedom, Pursuing Joy	Dance Steps Represent “Aspiring and Advancing”	Transform Life, Chase Happiness	Allegiance to the Dynasty, Loyalty to the Motherland
Tuan tao	Dance Step Breakdown Chart				
	significance	Ruling the Skies, Majestic as Land and Rivers	Spring Tranquility, Summer Peace, Autumn Blessings, Winter Fortune	Cherish My Motherland, Treasure My Home	Indomitable Spirit, Diligent Endeavor

These adaptive strategies are not passive compromise but active “cultural gene reproduction”, by integrating modern technology and compressing symbol connotation, communities have created an exit for the survival of Wuwei Lantern Festival in the face of state governance and market colonization. However, the scattered adaptive practices are still facing the risks of semiotic dilution and interruption of transmission, so the urgent need to build a collaborative governance system.

B. Collaborative Governance Innovation Framework Construction

This research builds a “3D collaborative governance framework” of Wuwei Lantern Festival based on “state - market - community” tripartite tension field with the core of “preserving semiotic sovereignty, technical empowerment and community autonomy”, and institutional coordination, aiming to resolve the contradiction of “preserving form but erasing spirit”, clarify the

right and responsibility of multi-subjects, establish the interactive mechanism of cultural authenticity and sustainable development.

1. Subject Coordination: Clarify the Boundaries and Synergy of Multi-actor Roles

The crux of collaborative governance is to define the function boundaries between government, market and society, and advocate for complementing synergistic effects. Wuwei Lantern Festival Division of Labor:

State (Cultural and Tourism Departments, Heritage Bureaus): Assume the role of “institutional designer” and “public service provider”. In place of strict parametric regulation, it should develop “cultural protection guidelines” that respect the ecological wisdom of the Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern. Like how when selecting bamboo for the Dougang board dragon lanterns, one can refer to the traditional principle “not to use bamboo that is over three years”, we shouldn’t establish mechanical bamboo size standards to select bamboo. At the same time, increase financial investment in heritage education, and set up a “Wuwei Lantern Festival Heritage Center”, which can train heritors and digitalize the process of traditional rituals (such as the digitization of the “eye-dotting ceremony” of the Bali Fish Lantern).

Market (cultural tourism companies, e-commerce platforms) - becoming “value converters” and “dissemination promoters”. Cultural tourism enterprises should not stick to simply packaging up the Wuwei lantern festival as a spectacle but rather develop more immersive cultural tourism products with the core rituals. For example, in Jiuzi Ancient Town, the “lantern ritual experience tour”, including the simulated ancestor worship ceremony at the clan hall, and an explanation of the “eight immortals’ tools” motif

on the Balifish lantern, so tourists can understand the culture behind the lantern performance. E-commerce platforms such as Taobao, JD.com need to create a “geographical indication certification system” for Wuwei Lantern Festival derivative products, and clearly display their place of origin and cultural background to avoid the loss of meaning and false marketing.

Community (Inheritors, Clan Organizations, Villagers): Be a “semiotic sovereign” and “cultural reproducers”. Inheritors, clan organizations, and villagers should be supported by the state and market to build a “traditional craft transmission mechanism”, including master-apprentice inheritance and school education. Like cooperate with local primary and middle school to conduct lantern craft workshop, letting young people to know the making process of Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern by old artisans’ guidance. Meanwhile, formulate the community’s self-governance regulations to standardize the use of culture symbols and avoid the excessive commercialization destroying the spiritual essence.

2. Mechanism Coordination: Establishing Interactive Mechanisms for Interest Coordination and Risk Prevention

To ensure the effective operation of the collaborative framework, three key mechanisms need to be established for the Wuwei Lantern Festival:

Interest Coordination Mechanism: Set up a “three-part consultation panel” of government, enterprise managers, and community inheritor representatives. Committee meeting for talking about how to make money off of cultural tourism, planning on leaving stuff behind, and other such stuff. For instance, the income from the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern’s scenic performances, a certain percentage should be allocated to the

community inheritance fund to support the training of young inheritors and the restoration of old rituals.

Risk Prevention Mechanism: Establish a cultural authenticity monitoring index system for Wuwei Lantern Festival, such as the retention rate of core rituals, the accuracy of symbolic transmission, and the participation of community members. Inviting experts on cultural heritage and local old artisans to make up a monitoring team to carry out regular evaluations. If there is any random change to the “Eight Immortal Tools” of the Bali Fish Lantern, it will be timely corrected.

Information Sharing Mechanism: Establish a digital platform for the Wuwei Lantern Festival that combines information about cultural heritage, inheritance status, cultural tourism activities, and market transactions. It is open to all subjects, enabling the state to understand the inheritance of the legacy, enterprises to acquire cultural resources lawfully, and communities to exhibit traditional handicrafts. such as uploading the historical development of the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern, the production process of the Bali Fish Lantern to the platform, so as to lay a foundation for collaborative decision making.

3. Spatial Coordination: Integrating “Archival Sanctuary” and “Spectacular Frontstage”

Facing the spatial schism of Wuwei Lantern Festival, spatial coordination is needed to achieve the harmonious coexistence of “archival sanctuary” and “spectacular front stage.” In terms of protecting “archival sanctuary,” for example, the Xinmin Village Ancestral Hall, restore the communal practice venue of the “archival sanctuary” and regularly carry out traditional rituals such as the “eye-dotting ceremony” of the Bali Fish Lantern on the “archival sanctuary,” thereby preserving the original ecological form

of the heritage. On the contrary, to guide the “spectacular frontstage” in tourist places like Jiuzi Ancient Town to put in authentic cultural symbols. For instance, when performing the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern, add explanation of the historical meaning of each dragon lantern segments, put the traditional production tools of Bali Fish Lantern in the surrounding exhibition area. By carrying out spatial functional division and connecting cultural symbols, the contradiction between administrative authenticity requirements and market spectacle requirements can be resolved.

C. Implementation Paths and Guarantee Mechanisms

In order to ensure that the governance structure of collaborative governance of the Wuwei lantern Festival can be effectively carried out, the implementation way and safeguard system of Wuwei Lantern Festival should be made:

1. Implementation Paths

Phase 1 (Short-term, 1-2 years): Foundation Construction: Complete the registration of the Wuwei Lantern Festival geographical indication, establish the tripartite consultation committee and digital information platform, and conduct the first round of cultural authenticity surveys. To sort out the main symbols and traditional rituals of the Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern, forming a “Wuwei Lantern Festival Cultural Gene Catalog.”

Phase 2 (medium term, 3 - 5 years): Mechanism Operation: Promote the official operation of the interest coordination, risk prevention, and information sharing mechanisms. Immerse and launch cultural tourism products in tourist areas, carry out lantern craft activities in local schools (lantern craft into campus), and train 20-30 young inheritors for the Bali Fish

Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern respectively. Digital archiving of key rituals, such as the traditional “dragon-burning ceremony” of the Dougang Board Dragon Lantern, according to documentary records.

Phase 3 (long term, 5-10 years) Ecological formation: Form a sustainable cultural heritage and development ecology of Wuwei Lantern Festival. Community has independent cultural reproduction capability, Market realizes the sustainable conversion of cultural value, and State focuses on macro-supervision and public service supply. Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern have become the most representative cultural symbols of local identity, and the traditional ecological wisdom and ethics of local society are included.

2. Guarantee Mechanisms

Institutional Guarantee: Promote the localisation of rules like “Wuwei Lantern Festival protection and inheritance regulations” to clarify the legal position of the collaborative governance system, and the rights and obligations of all parties. Add Wuwei Lantern Festival protection to the local government’s performance assessment indicators to guarantee policy enforcement.

Technical support: Cooperating with universities, scientific research institutions, etc., for technological research on the protection of heritage. Thus, by recording the body of the Balifish lantern and the Dougang board dragon lantern with 3D scan, and using VR to mimic the re-creation of the traditional rituals, to provide technical support for the passing on of culture and tourism.

Financial guarantee. Establishing the Wuwei Lantern Festival Ecological Reciprocity Fund (Figure 6), including government financial allocation, cultural tourism enterprise donation, and social donation. The fund will be used to train the inheritor, restore rituals, build digitally, and carry out the construction of digital inheritance sites, and there is a specific supervisory body to ensure that the fund’s use is transparent and reasonable.

Public Participation: carry out public education activities, using media such as short videos, documentaries to increase the public’s awareness of protecting Wuwei Lantern Festival in local people and tourists. Encourage social organizations and volunteers to join in the heritage protection work. For example, organize “lantern culture volunteer explanation teams” in tourist areas.

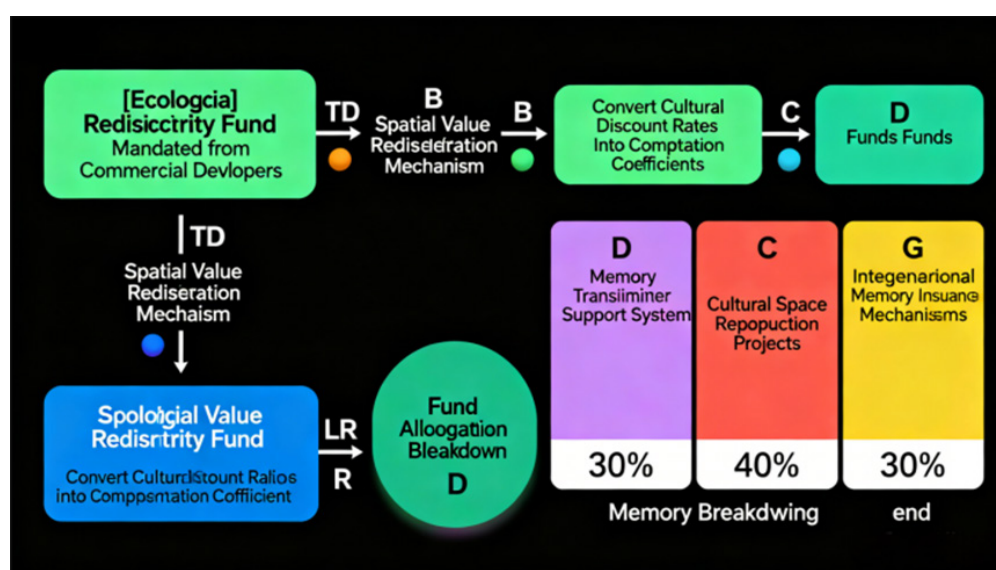


Figure 6 Operation Framework of the Wuwei Lantern Festival Ecological Reciprocity Fund

Source: Author's design based on collaborative governance theory and local practice needs.

V. Conclusion

This paper takes Wuwei Lantern Festival, mainly including the Bali Fish Lantern and Dougang Board Dragon Lantern, as a case to explore the transformation mechanism of ICH in China under the visual governance and put forward a collaborative governance innovation framework. The research shows that state power and market forces visual governance of ICH leads to a “preserving form while erasing spirit” paradox, such as the eye-dotting consecration ritual for Bali Fish Lantern, and the dragon-burning ceremony for Dougang Board Dragon Lantern are deleted, and the cultural connotation is diluted into visual spectacle. However, the community actors constructed cultural resilience through “technological pleating innovation” and “ritual density compensation”, which demonstrated the possibility of active adjustment under external constraints.

The “three-dimensional collaborative governance model”(subject coordination, mechanism coordination, spatial coordination) constructed by us is able to provide a path to solve the conflict of cultural authenticity and sustainable development. To clarify the roles of state, market, and community, establish interactive mechanisms, and integrate spatial functions, it will be able to effectively protect the semiotic sovereignty of Wuwei Lantern Festival and promote the sustainable reproduction of cultural genes. The implementation paths and guarantees proposed in this paper also further ensure the operability of the framework, providing a reference for the protection and development of other ICH projects in China.

This study is also limited in some way. Due to the restrictions of the scope of empirical research, the research of collaborative governance

framework is limited to Wuwei lantern festival, whether it can be applied to other types of ICH such as traditional music, folk art still requires further examination. Future research can increase the range of cases, to compare and analyze the visual governance mechanism and the collaborative governance path of different kinds of ICH, thereby improving the theoretical system of ICH collaborative governance. At the same time, with the development of digital technology, how to use new technologies such as AI and metaverse to innovate and transmit the Wuwei Lantern Festival will also be an important direction for future research.

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