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Organizing Intangible Cultural Heritage: How a Community-Based Organization Sustains Paper-Cutting Transmission in an Urban Community

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Abstract

Community participation is widely seen as central to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH), yet little is known about how living transmission is actually organized and kept going at the community level. This study examines how a community-based organization (CBO) works as a hub in the living transmission of paper-cutting. It draws on a qualitative case study of a grassroots paper-cutting service team in an urban community in Beijing, using participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and virtual ethnography of WeChat interactions. The analysis identifies four interconnected mechanisms. The organization institutionalizes practice, turning spontaneous activity into a stable community routine. It sustains an intergenerational relay supported by stratified training. It uses digital tools to extend transmission across online and offline settings. And it stages public recognition that turn embodied skill into visible, valued work. A key finding is that these mechanisms are held together because the organization's leaders are embedded in the local community, holding both administrative and community roles that let them channel space, resources, and legitimacy into the craft. These findings point to the organizational work that keeps living heritage alive. A locally embedded community organization, able to weave resources and digital tools into everyday practice, matters as much to safeguarding as technology or official recognition does.

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage gives communities public spaces and shared memories, and in doing so it helps hold them together (Rivero Moreno, 2020). Yet heritage around the world is under pressure. Cultural homogenization and the marginalization of local communities erode it, and globalization often overlooks local cultural identities (Agung & Wiflihani, 2024). Against these pressures, community participation has become the cornerstone of safeguarding practice. The community is the real bearer of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and heritage is defined in terms of the community that carries it (UNESCO, 2003). International guidance reflects this, calling for the widest possible participation of local people, especially women and youth, working together with non-governmental and local organizations(UNESCO, 2019).

Paper-cutting is a vital part of Chinese cultural heritage, carrying people's hopes for good fortune and happiness. In 2009 it was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, after a multi-stage nomination in which local practices were mediated through bureaucratic and expert systems at the provincial and national levels (Bodolec, 2013). Early studies focused mainly on regional characteristics. Flitsch's (1999) ethnographic work on Manchu paper-cutting showed how folk traditions are rooted in local environments and historical memory, while Yang (2012) analyzed the stylistic and technical differences among paper-cutting artists from different regions through the Sino-Swiss paper-cutting art project. The social functions of paper-cutting, however, have always been tied to China's cultural context, market economy, and social governance (Wu, 2015). Despite this body of work, paper-cutting transmission still faces serious challenges, including cultural discontinuity, declining youth engagement, commercial pressures, and weak policy support (Yan et al., 2024). Institutional measures

such as policy support and organizational platforms can strengthen the sustainability of traditional crafts (Zhu et al., 2021), yet the weakening of community-based transmission remains at the core of these challenges. This points to a pressing need to re-examine the role of community-based transmission in safeguarding practice today.

The centrality of the community in safeguarding ICH is now widely accepted, and recent studies have increasingly explored the digitization of paper-cutting as a means of preservation (e.g., Cheng & Chen, 2025; Dai et al., 2024; Zhao & Kim, 2024). A more basic question, however, has received little attention. We still know little about how the living transmission of paper-cutting is actually organized and sustained at the community level. Much of the digital scholarship stays focused on the technology itself. The concrete actor that carries transmission forward, the grassroots organization that mobilizes people, links resources, and folds the craft into everyday community life, has rarely been examined as the central mechanism of living transmission. Technologies and participatory ideals do not sustain a craft on their own. They have to be organized and turned into daily practice by a community actor. How such an organization performs this role remains an open and pressing question.

To address this gap, this study examines how the Y Community Paper-Cutting Service Team in Beijing, a grassroots community-based organization, sustains paper-cutting as a living tradition. The study is guided by one overarching question and three related sub-questions. The overarching question asks how a community-based organization sustains the living transmission of paper-cutting over the long term. The first sub-question concerns the mechanisms through which the organization institutionalizes the practice and carries it across generations. The second asks how the organization weaves digital tools into everyday transmission without treating digitization as an end in itself. The third considers how it turns craft practice into public, valued work through exhibition and community events.

2. Literature Review

2.1. From Consensus to Mechanism: Community Participation in ICH Safeguarding

According to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and its Operational Directives, communities, groups, and individuals play a pivotal role in the identification, protection, and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Bak's (2018) analysis of Korean ICH projects corroborates this view and further demonstrates that ICH communities are diverse and flexible in their characteristics and boundaries. This composition includes not only those directly involved in the heritage but also broader groups with less direct contact with heritage elements. Moreover, their members are not homogeneous. Nonetheless, “communities themselves are the most critical agents in any effort to safeguard intangible cultural heritage”. In community participation, the continuous interaction between intangible cultural heritage and community members is crucial. Based on the protection of heritage, community members should discuss together and decide how to enhance the value and importance of these past heritages, and take action to implement a shared vision. Only when community members

cherish these heritages with deep affection, collective memory, and respect, can the heritage long-term sustainability(Wentsung, 2014).

A consensus in contemporary heritage studies establishes the community as the central agent in cultural heritage transmission. The Faro Convention pioneered the definition of cultural heritage as a “resource for society” rather than merely an object of preservation, emphasizing its contributions to community identity, human rights, and sustainable development(Council of Europe, 2005). It formally defines “heritage communities” as groups of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage which they wish to sustain and transmit to future generations. Reflecting this shift, the safeguarding paradigm for ICH is experiencing a fundamental transformation as it moves away from expert-driven inventory management toward community-centered value co-creation mechanisms, demonstrating that ICH sustainability is intrinsically dependent on collective community practices(Vecco, 2010). Correspondingly, Grey and Kuokkanen (2020) argue that the genuine preservation of ICH cannot be attained through externally mandated co-management approaches, but must instead be realized via the self-determined practices of local communities.

Safeguarding ICH authenticity necessitates its continuous adaptation to reflect the socio-cultural evolution of its bearer communities. Inherently dynamic, ICH evolves alongside the socio-historical transformations of its creators and bearers, thereby providing communities with “a sense of identity and continuity” (Lenzerini, 2011). This “living” nature dictates that ICH must continually evolve and adapt through transmission. A compelling illustration of this adaptive process can be found in Lin and Ang, (2025) whose research on Teochew opera in Malaysia details how troupes have incorporated local cultural elements and adopted modern stage technologies to attract younger and multi-ethnic audiences. Extending this perspective, Lempert (2015)argues that the true value of heritage lies not in freezing it at a moment of past glory, but in recognizing it as a vessel of time that records the continuous choices, adaptations, and transformations of human communities. Given this dynamic nature, which precludes static preservation, the effective safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage must be understood as a dynamic process of “knowledge co-creation” that is community-value-driven and integrates internal community knowledge with external perspectives (Ruhanen & Whitford, 2019).

In the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, while the central role of communities has gained consensus, how to sustain their endogenous motivation remains a core issue. Research by Lenao (2015) on the case of Lekhubu Island in Botswana demonstrates that even without considering profit pressures, the systemic lack of community governance capacity and the structural failure of external support networks are sufficient to cause the stagnation of cultural heritage transmission projects. The study attributes the crux of the problem to the formalism in community election mechanisms, the long-term deficiency of professional expertise, and the substantive absence of key stakeholders.

Community participation is not only a normative requirement but a functional mechanism for sustainable heritage management. Li et al. (2020) argue that community participation is foundational for sustainable cultural heritage management, while noting that international approaches typically

emphasize bottom-up participation, whereas in China the process is more government-driven with lower community involvement. In the management of intangible cultural heritage, community participation plays a critical role by fostering an inclusive and dynamic process that empowers sustainable urban development (Wentsung, 2014). This theoretical view is strongly supported by the empirical work of Aziz et al. (2023), whose research on the Melaka World Heritage Site demonstrates a significant positive correlation between participation levels and heritage awareness, showing how targeted education transforms communities into proactive safeguarding agents.

The consensus on community participation, however, leaves a question unanswered. A community is not a single actor. It is a loose population of residents with different interests, schedules, and levels of commitment. Urban neighborhoods hold considerable latent capacity for collective action, yet this potential is realized only when rules, resources, and organizing capabilities are brought together to mobilize it (Nan & Qi, 2026). In the Chinese context the gap is especially clear. Community involvement in cultural work often stays procedural and government-led, and a genuine bottom-up approach has yet to find a firm foothold (Hu et al., 2022; Li, 2025). State efforts to standardize grassroots cultural services can even dampen the local initiative they mean to support (Zhang & Ran, 2026). Someone still has to convene people, secure a place to meet, keep the teaching going, and carry the work into everyday neighborhood life. This labor tends to fall to a smaller, organized body within the community. It is this organizational layer, sitting between individual practitioners and the wider community, that turns a shared interest into a sustained routine and that the present study takes as its starting point. Understanding how it works calls for a closer look at what community-based organizations are and how they function.

2.2. CBO as Intermediary Hubs: Connecting Stakeholder Networks and Digital Engagement for ICH Sustainability

The efficacy of institutional support for ICH depends on mechanisms for deep community engagement. In international literature, the community-based organization (CBO) is widely recognized as a pivotal mechanism for local governance. CBO have been discussed as voluntary, place-based groups that mobilize residents around shared concerns (Mathbor, 2008; Westoby & Dowling, 2013). In this study, we adopt “CBO” to refer to what China's Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) terms shequ shehui zuzhi (□□□□□□), grassroots entities initiated by community residents to conduct public services, neighborhood mutual aid, and cultural or recreational activities (MCA, 2017). While these organizations share the core features of CBO in the international literature (voluntary membership, place-based orientation, and service to local residents), they are distinctive in operating within China's administrative framework, where such groups are facilitated by sub-district authorities through a simplified record-filing (bei'an) system rather than emerging entirely independent of the state. This institutional embeddedness, rather than undermining their grassroots character, positions them as intermediaries capable of translating macro policy into localized practice.

The effectiveness of community governance relies on the process of generating social capital through social networks and ultimately transforming it into capacity for collective action. Governance systems need to address pluralistic goals concurrently (Johnston, 2010). CBO serves as a crucial mechanism for facilitating collective community action, emphasizing the promotion of resident participation and community development through social networks, social capital, and community capacity (Mancini et al., 2005). Formal and informal social networks constitute the organizational foundation. Through sustained interaction and engagement, they generate social capital encompassing both tangible elements like information resources (e.g., knowledge and opportunities) and intangible social mechanisms such as trust systems and reciprocity norms (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). These elements ultimately enhance a community's capacity for collective action (Chaskin et al., 2001).

The sustainable vitality of CBO relies not only on institutions and resources, but is more fundamentally rooted in the cultural meanings and social capital co-constructed by their members. In the allocation of public service resources, CBO has significantly expanded the coverage of public services through resource leveraging and policy advocacy (Cheng et al., 2022). By fostering a sense of community belonging and identity, they effectively enhance residents' willingness to engage in voluntary activities (Liu & Nah, 2022). Social capital (trust and shared norms) serves as the foundation for inter-organizational collaboration, while collaborative efficiency largely depends on “boundary spanners” and pre-established social networks (Kapucu, 2006). Existing research on CBO has primarily focused on institutional design and resource mobilization (North, 1990), while paying relatively insufficient attention to their cultural dimensions. Tierney and Minor's (2004) study on organizational effectiveness suggests that shared meanings constructed by members through symbols, rituals, and communication often play a more decisive role in determining an organization's long-term vitality than its formal structure.

The sustainability of cultural heritage is not solely dependent on the efforts of practitioners but is deeply embedded in a network of interactions among multiple actors. As demonstrated by Tan et al. (2020), the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage relies on the intricate interactions among multiple stakeholders, including actors (artisans), audiences, affordances (environmental support and opportunities), artifacts, and apprentices. These elements form a dynamic cultural creativity system essential for its vitality. Given that ICH is inherently dynamic, characterized by fluid boundaries and active practices, its digital evolution necessitates coordinated efforts from diverse stakeholders(Zhelev et al., 2021). Spina (2025) demonstrates that a successful community branding process necessarily depends on the collaborative participation of multiple stakeholders, including residents, local government, experts, and businesses, and requires co-designed, co-evaluated, and co-implemented strategies to achieve sustainable enhancement of cultural heritage.

CBO harnesses digital tools to enable citizen coproduction of public services, evolving from traditional facilitators to dynamic agents of multi-dimensional community development. CBO serves as a critical intermediary facilitating citizen engagement in both public service delivery and local governance processes(Cheng, 2019). Ostrom (1996) proposed the concept of “coproduction,” emphasizing that effective public service delivery relies on collaborative participation between government and civil

society. This theory has been extended in the digital era, as demonstrated by Cheng et al.(2020) in their study of practices in Zhejiang Province. Their research reveals that community-based social organizations significantly enhanced resident volunteer participation by utilizing digital technologies such as social media platforms and WeChat mini-programs. The study documented how these organizations sequentially fulfilled distinct functions, from resource mobilization to psychological support and ultimately to economic revitalization, across different phases.

Digital technologies and strategic online engagement are fundamentally reshaping how CBO facilitates civic participation and resource mobilization. Digital technologies broaden citizen participation channels, restructure demand identification mechanisms in public services, and drive a governance shift from “experience-driven” to “data-driven” approaches(Kowalski et al., 2020). The “civic footprint” model proposed by Shier et al. (2022) demonstrates that CBO promotes civic engagement through three key mechanisms: bringing community members together, promoting and creating awareness, and facilitating engagement in organizational activities. Digital media platforms have become essential tools for community-based social organizations to engage stakeholders and secure resources. As demonstrated on TikTok, these organizations can significantly enhance user participation and build stable support networks through interactive community-building strategies.

Digital media is reshaping the interaction patterns between CBO and residents, creating conditions for a shift from one-way communication to multi-level engagement. Digital social media interactions exhibit a hierarchical structure comprising information dissemination, community building, and action mobilization (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). However, empirical evidence from public service organizations demonstrates that their utilization of digital social media remains predominantly confined to unidirectional information dissemination (Campbell et al., 2014). New media, particularly participatory media platforms, is being increasingly adopted by CBO for community outreach and issue advocacy (Ciszek, 2013). Unlike traditional one-way communication, content that emphasizes dialogue and user engagement fosters stronger community connections, thereby ensuring sustained resource mobilization for long-term organizational impact (Wiley et al., 2023). However, traditional communication methods remain indispensable to ensure effective information reach to all target populations (Linos et al., 2022).

Over the past decade, digital tools have changed how paper-cutting is taught and shared. AI-driven “cultural gene banks” use machine learning to decode pattern symbols and offset the loss of skill as inheritor populations age (P. Cheng & Chen, 2025), and generative models such as Stable Diffusion LoRA can now produce intricate patterns automatically (Dai et al., 2024). Virtual reality lowers the entry threshold by turning tacit skill into something learners can see and try (Chen & Lyu, 2015; Zhao & Kim, 2024). Other work builds knowledge frameworks that map the semantic links among pattern elements (Fan & Fu, 2025; Zheng, 2024), while photogrammetry and multispectral imaging capture material detail for preservation (Es Sebar et al., 2023). Together, this research has turned paper-cutting digitization into a multidisciplinary field (Y. Huang et al., 2024). Digital platforms extend this work further, opening online spaces where the craft reaches wider and more varied audiences (Irsyadi & Madamidola, 2023; Liang et al., 2021), and digital archives paired with intergenerational collaboration help keep community ties alive

(García-Mieres et al., 2025; Giglitto et al., 2019). Yet technology alone carries a risk. When digital projects are technology-led and community involvement stays shallow, heritage can be captured in digital form but lose its living character, a danger recent work calls digital fossilization (Y.-C. Tan et al., 2026). Someone has to decide which tools to use and how, and in a community setting that work falls to the organization that puts them into everyday practice.

The review points in one direction. A craft stays alive not because of any single resource but because an organization puts those resources to work in everyday community life. This study traces that work through four mechanisms. The organization gives the practice stable routines. It passes the craft down through layered training. It uses digital tools to widen everyday teaching. And it wins the public recognition that turns skill into standing and legitimacy.Two ideas inform these mechanisms at specific points. Collins' (2004) interaction ritual explains the emotional pull of shared occasions, and Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital explains how skill becomes recognized value. Neither is treated as an overarching framework.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Study Area

The study was conducted in the Y Community, located in Changping District, Beijing, China (Fig. 1). This community represents a typical case of a rapidly urbanizing area in China's megacities, characterized by its unique demographic composition and socio-spatial transformation from a former village into a residential area. The community has a permanent population of approximately 2,000 residents, with a notably aged demographic structure, of which 400 residents are over 60 years old. The population is primarily composed of three distinct groups, leading to a complex social fabric: (1) original employees of state-owned enterprises and their descendants, who obtained property rights through welfare housing allocations; (2) rural inhabitants relocated due to urban development projects; and (3) a large floating population of tenants, many working in the logistics industry, attracted by the community's proximity to economically vibrant Chaoyang District. These groups exhibit significant disparities in lifestyles, rights demands, and cultural preferences, posing challenges to community cohesion and grassroots governance. In response, the community residents' committee has established various cultural and service organizations (e.g., paper-cutting service teams, security patrol teams, dance groups, and diabolo teams) to foster social interaction and integration.

3.2. Data Collection

The data collection for this study was conducted in sequential phases encompassing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document gathering. Initially, a year-long participant observation of the community paper-cutting service team was undertaken from July 2021 to June 2022. This phase focused closely on the living transmission of intangible cultural heritage, specifically the teaching and innovative practice of paper-cutting skills, and its interaction with the local community governance

network. Field notes were regularly recorded to identify preliminary patterns of transmission and community participation, which subsequently informed the design of the semi-structured interview outlines. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were employed to gather multidimensional narratives. Using purposive sampling, ten key stakeholders were selected across four distinct categories: 1) three leaders from different eras of the paper-cutting service team (PTL), who provided insights into the team's strategic evolution and historical development; 2) three general team members (GTM), who recounted their personal learning journeys, motivations, and sense of community belonging; 3) the director and the cultural and educational officer of the community residents' committee (CRC), who elucidated the administrative and resource support extended by the committee; and 4) two officials from the sub-district office (SDO), who discussed broader administrative strategies for establishing the heritage brand and promoting inter-community exchanges. The profiles of all ten interviewees are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Statistical table of interviews.

No.	Code	Stakeholders	Sex	Interview duration (min)	Interview location
1.	I1	PTL	Female	60	CRC office
2.	I2	PTL	Female	55	CRC office
3.	I3	PTL	Female	58	CRC office
4.	I4	GTM	Female	30	Homes
5.	I5	GTM	Female	38	Homes
6.	I6	GTM	Female	40	Homes
7.	I7	CRC	Female	45	CRC office
8.	I8	CRC	Male	43	CRC office
9.	I9	SDO	Female	38	SDO office
10.	I10	SDO	Male	40	SDO office

To contextualize and enrich the observational and interview data, a qualitative examination of textual and digital materials was performed. This involved a systematic review of community announcements and the team's internal activity records. Crucially, this textual analysis extended to a virtual ethnography of the interactions within the team's dedicated WeChat group. Continuous participation in this digital space began in July 2021, providing ongoing insights into the digital dissemination of techniques, real-time member interactions, and the cultivation of collective identity via online platforms. Furthermore, photographs and examples of paper-cutting artworks were gathered as visual evidence. This comprehensive material analysis established a grounded contextual foundation, enhancing the depth of the case study and supporting the faithfulness of the empirical argumentation.

3.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the collected data, including field notes, interview transcripts, and relevant community documents, was conducted using an inductive thematic approach, focusing on identifying recurring patterns directly from the raw materials without relying on predetermined theoretical frameworks. The entire dataset was read through multiple times to build close familiarity with the empirical details. During this process, line-by-line open coding was performed to mark segments that reflected how the paper-cutting heritage was organized and sustained. These initial codes were then systematically compiled into a spreadsheet to track their provenance and original contexts.

Through a continuous process of reading, comparing, and regrouping, these initial codes were gradually sorted into broader categories based on their similarities and conceptual relevance. This ongoing refinement eventually led to the development of four central descriptive themes that organize the findings: “from spontaneous activity to institutionalized practice,” “the synergy of intergenerational relay and stratified training,” “digital empowerment and online-offline spatial production,” and “the conversion of embodied craft into cultural capital.” To enhance the trustworthiness of this interpretation, the evolving findings were subjected to peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research. Additionally, interview accounts were triangulated against field observations and documentary records to ensure that the final descriptions remain faithful to the lived experiences within the community.

3.4. Researcher Positionality

The first author has been embedded in the Y Community since July 2021 as both a social work service provider and a participant-observer, maintaining continuous involvement in the paper-cutting team's activities and WeChat group. This prolonged, service-based engagement offered deep contextual knowledge but also required reflexive awareness of potential over-identification with participants' perspectives. To mitigate this, the research team regularly discussed emergent interpretations and actively sought disconfirming evidence during the analytical process.

4. Results

The analysis reveals that the Y Community Paper-Cutting Service Team, as a CBO, functions as a hub enabling the living transmission of ICH through four interconnected mechanisms. First, it transforms spontaneous cultural activity into institutionalized community practice through multi-stakeholder collaboration. Second, it ensures the continuity and quality of skill transfer through the synergy of intergenerational relay and stratified training. Third, it broadens the spatiotemporal boundaries of transmission through digital empowerment and online-offline spatial production. Fourth, it converts embodied craft into multidimensional cultural capital through public display and community spectacle. The following sections present each mechanism in turn. The overall structure of these mechanisms is summarized in Fig. 2.

4.1. From Spontaneity to Institutionalization: The Practice of Living Inheritance of Paper-Cutting ICH in Community Integration

The team became an established organization not through official designation but through a resident's initiative that the residents' committee took up and sustained. The group's formation was initiated by a resident named An, who spearheaded a creative paper-cutting project for a community-wide exhibition titled “7·11” World Population Day. The artworks were showcased on the community's public notice board, garnering significant attention from numerous residents. Many expressed a keen interest in learning paper-cutting from ANL. In response to this enthusiasm, the community residents' committee supported ANL in founding a senior paper-cutting interest group. This group comprised several seniors and some representatives of the residents' committee. Most participants lacked any formal background in fine arts or prior experience in paper-cutting, facing numerous challenges initially. Nevertheless, their profound passion for traditional paper-cutting drove them to persistently hone their skills. They even gifted their handcrafted “Fu” (symbolizing blessings) and “Shou” (longevity) paper-cuttings to neighbors over eighty, which raised the craft's visibility in the community, further elevating the prominence of this traditional art form among their neighbors. This bottom-up initiative, sparked by individual passion and subsequently institutionalized by the residents' committee, demonstrates a collaborative model for ICH safeguarding that departs from a purely top-down governmental directive. Institutionalization was central to this process. Community integration depends on consolidating shared activity into regular, normative routines, and in socially mixed communities these routines function as collective rituals that bind members to shared symbols and to place (R. Huang et al., 2023; Low & Altman, 1992).

Collaborative efforts among various parties have played a pivotal role in promoting the community inheritance of the ICH of paper-cutting. With the robust support and advocacy of local sub-district offices and community authorities, the Y Community Paper-cutting Training Base was officially established in 2013. Subsequently, a dedicated community paper-cutting service team was formed, tasked with furthering the paper-cutting legacy within the community. This service team not only focuses on imparting paper-cutting skills but is also dedicated to engaging in volunteer work for community public affairs, effectively creating a dual-function mechanism of “skill transmission and volunteer service.” This multi-party collaboration demonstrates how CBO can leverage social capital, specifically trust and reciprocity, and transmute it into such a capacity for collective action (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The establishment of this dual mechanism is crucial. It signifies a strategic shift from viewing ICH as a static object to be preserved, to leveraging it as a dynamic resource for community building. This shift reframed the craft from an object of preservation to a resource for community life, consistent with UNESCO's emphasis on the social viability of ICH (UNESCO, 2015). An organization's endurance rests not on institutions or culture alone but on their combination (Burns, 2017).

Over time, the Y Community Paper-cutting Service Team has become a recognized, branded community organization for ICH. t was formed by residents, runs on neighbourhood networks, and links officials and

residents through collective cultural activity. Over the past thirteen years, the team has trained a total of 150 members, produced more than 2,000 paper-cutting artworks, and conducted hundreds of volunteer service activities. These activities built trust among residents and broadened the team's role from preserving a craft to carrying out community volunteer service. The craft became a medium for sustaining the organization and its ties to the community, not an end in itself. Currently, the team consists of 21 members. In terms of age distribution, it comprises 16 “young-old” individuals (aged 55–69), 3 “old-old” individuals (aged 70–79), and 2 “oldest-old” individuals (aged 80 and above). All began without any background in the craft, and steady practice has brought marked progress. Some can now not just execute but design their own patterns, and they have become the core of the team's design and creative work.

4.2 The Dual Drive of “ICH in the Community” Living Inheritance: The Synergy of Inter-generational Relay and Stratified Training

A craft stays alive only if its people do, both the leaders who guide it and the members who make it. The paper-cutting team sustained both. Across three instructor generations it renewed its leadership, and through layered training it raised ordinary members from copying patterns to designing their own. Community-based education frameworks describe this kind of progression from awareness to capacity to active participation (Abdul Aziz et al., 2023). What held the two together was the organizational position of the leaders who ran them.

The intergenerational relay mechanism executed by key inheritors plays a pivotal role in ensuring the continuous vitality of ICH projects within modern communities. Technological and skill resources are universally recognized as central to the safeguarding, transmission, and management of such heritage (Lobovikov-Katz et al., 2014; Ibáñez Etxebarría et al., 2012). During the foundational phase (2012–2015), ANL, the project's spearhead, adeptly restructured an informal elderly interest group into a standardized community service team. By mentoring a dedicated cohort of core members, specifically ZHY, CJY, and YJH, she instituted a robust transmission mechanism that transitioned paper-cutting from an isolated individual pastime into a shared community asset. Following ANL’s relocation in 2015, ZHY stepped up as the second-generation instructor (2015–2019). Collaborating closely with CJY, she actively competed in municipal-level contests in Beijing and sought advanced mentorship from master ICH inheritors to refine their collective expertise. They methodically cross-trained other team members and innovatively integrated paper-cutting into community public relations, amplifying the project's cultural resonance. Notably, ZHY pioneered online live-streaming classes, a breakthrough that effectively expanded their audience, bypassed spatial-temporal constraints, and broadened the collective's social network.

After 2019, CJY took over as the third-generation instructor, while ZHY continued in a supporting role. Under their guidance, the team invited experienced ICH inheritors to lead advanced workshops that deepened members' understanding of the craft's historical and cultural dimensions. Building on their earlier digital experiments, the two instructors developed an integrated “online and offline” teaching model through the team's WeChat networks, which broadened the group's reach and strengthened

community awareness of the craft's history, aesthetic meaning, and contemporary relevance. Alongside this, they organized volunteer initiatives that brought technical instruction together with public service, extending the team's work beyond the classroom and into the life of the community.

The reason the relay held at each handover, instead of breaking down, lies in who the leaders were. Both ZHY and CJY worked as social workers in the community while also leading the paper-cutting team. This dual role let them act as “boundary spanners” (Kapucu, 2006) between the formal administrative system and the informal grassroots network. Because they stood inside both, they could bring public resources, policy support, and official standing directly into the group's work. When the sub-district office or the Women's Federation held an activity, such as receiving visiting officials at the community party-service centre, the leaders would bring a dozen members to run a paper-cutting session on site. These invitations came often, and ties with the Women's Federation were especially close, since most members were women.

The limits of this arrangement are as telling as its strengths. After CJY moved out of the neighbourhood to care for her grandchild, she stepped down both as a social worker and as team leader. She still shares her own work in the group chat, but she no longer assigns tasks or organizes activities, explaining that she cannot return if something needs to be done on site. Her enthusiasm for the craft has not faded. What she lost was the administrative position that had let her mobilize others. This shows that what sustained transmission was not personal passion alone but the organizational location of a leader who was at once a social worker and a team head. Once that pairing broke, even a committed instructor could do little more than take part as an individual.

The team's transmission extended beyond its own members to the youngest generation. Members trained in the team frequently passed the craft to their grandchildren at home, embedding it within family life. Each summer, with the exception of the pandemic years, the team organized paper-cutting workshops for primary school children, to which parents or grandparents brought them, attracting fifteen to twenty local children on each occasion. Senior members were also invited to teach paper-cutting as an intangible cultural heritage in school clubs, where classes of twenty to thirty students learned the craft. Through these channels, transmission reached from the team into both households and schools, extending to children who were not themselves formal members.

This 13-year trajectory of intergenerational relay shows that the enduring survival of grassroots ICH projects requires a talent replacement and cultivation pipeline. The progressive accumulation and renewal of this symbolic asset across generations matters, as it fosters the steady expansion of social networks while reinforcing structural community ties. The distinct approaches of the three successive leaders form a chain, driving the preservation and evolution of traditional craftsmanship in modern urban settings.

As the team moved from acquiring information to building capacity, it developed both technical mastery and creative agency. This phase focuses on enhancing residents' ability to safeguard heritage through targeted skills development. Initially, the members' output was reproductive, relying on pre-printed

drawings for tracing and cutting due to limited drawing proficiency. However, as their comprehension matured, the instructors cultivated a heightened sensitivity toward their everyday surroundings. This pedagogical shift encouraged members to move beyond strict adherence to external patterns, making printed references only supplementary aids. Over time, participants progressed from simple replication to independent design, capturing the texture of community life through original motifs such as seasonal flowers and customized characters. This shift marks an important transition within ICH transmission. Transmission ceases to be a mechanical instruction of technique and becomes a cultural practice, bearing out the idea that “ICH is inherited through life itself.”

Active participation is realized through hands-on community engagement, where members contribute to heritage protection while sharpening their skills. The collective frequently aligns its creative tasks with major public milestones or festivals, such as National Day on October 1st, tailoring tasks to varying proficiency levels. Novices begin with fundamental exercises, such as cutting five-pointed stars or “Double Happiness” characters, which gradually builds their confidence and thematic understanding. Veteran artisans, by contrast, take on complex, large-scale projects, bringing their own creativity to the shared theme. Through this stratified engagement, members improve their craft and strengthen their presence in the neighborhood. Recognition sustained the cycle. Public display of members' work and the response it drew gave participants a sense of accomplishment that kept them involved. The 7-person senior-member group played a part here too. When an important activity required specific works, the leaders notified this core group directly, which ensured that community and sub-district events were completed on time and to standard.

Ultimately, the strategic cycle of the initiative, marked by a progression from imitation to originality and structured, layered participation, is sustained through feedback and reinforcement loops. Social validation, public recognition, and the resultant boost in self-efficacy serve as intrinsic motivators for sustained resident involvement. This approach restructures the daily lived experiences of the participants, fostering a sense of cultural identity and self-worth that establishes a lasting logic of participation. At the same time, a cooperative dynamic has emerged within the group. As Wenger (1998) notes, a Community of Practice (CoP) comprises individuals who share a common passion and interact regularly to deepen their expertise. This closely reflects the internal dynamics of the paper-cutting team, where seasoned members mentor newcomers, reinforcing their own expertise through collaborative participation. The active involvement of members reflects the group's institutional strength. This mutual-aid dynamic both improves the creative output of the team and fosters a spirit of solidarity across the neighborhood, sustaining a durable mechanism for the transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

4.3. Digital Engagement and Spatial Production: The Online-Offline Synergy in ICH Transmission

The Y Community Paper-cutting Service Team has implemented an “online + offline” collaborative model, establishing a mechanism that enhances the resilience of ICH preservation. At the institutional level, the Community Residents' Committee transforms the traditional linear model of public service delivery into a

network-based structure through collaboration and resource sharing (Millard, 2018). By providing a dedicated training room and absorbing all administrative expenses, including scissors, paper, tape, and professional framing costs, the Committee establishes a stable material foundation. This institutional support sustains a tiered training system driven by the orderly succession of three generations of inheritors, with differentiated teaching for both new and seasoned members to build a tiered pool of talent. Within this space, instructors volunteer their time while members participate free of charge, convening weekly every Friday noon to acquire paper-cutting skills, exchange creative concepts, and exhibit selected works professionally mounted around the walls.

Crucially, this training room is precisely the administrative meeting room of the Residents' Committee. According to Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, the venue originally functioned as a standard setting for administrative meetings, democratic discussions, and policy dissemination, a top-down, rationally conceived “representation of space” (conceived space) designed for institutional governance. However, when it is decorated with paper-cutting works and converted into a training workshop during specific periods, the venue is re-appropriated through daily cultural practices. It is common for residents visiting the committee on administrative matters to pause and view the professionally framed paper-cuttings on the walls, spontaneously taking photographs. Through this transformation, the room turns into a “representational space” (lived space) filled with everyday experiences, collective memories, and emotional resonance. Leveraging this shared interest, committee cadres routinely initiate conversations with residents around the paper-cutting pieces before transitioning into formal administrative tasks. Paper-cutting thus becomes a communicative medium bridging residents and community personnel, integrating implicit ICH education into daily life and, in turn, strengthening neighbor trust and social capital.

Within this network structure, the WeChat group “Y Community Paper-cutting Class” functions as a digital community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). The group emerged alongside the offline class around 2018, growing naturally out of the team's regular teaching. Serving as a channel for teaching announcements and homework assignments, it maintains administrative continuity while building a shared knowledge base. Members upload their completed works and ask instructors for guidance, establishing a system of informal accountability and mutual encouragement that aligns with the reciprocity norms described by Bowles and Gintis (2002). Professional instructors provide online feedback, while seasoned members post instructional videos that widen access to knowledge. This proved especially important during the pandemic, when members could not gather in person. Instruction moved into the group, where the instructor would tell members what to cut and post drafts and patterns for them to follow, ensuring that practice and mentorship continued even when offline gatherings were interrupted. By organizing instruction and mobilizing volunteer participation through these WeChat networks, the service team achieves coproduction in the digital era, wherein residents transform from passive recipients into co-producers of public cultural services (Y. Cheng, 2019; Ostrom, 1996). This aligns with the observations of Cheng et al. (2020) regarding how the CBO leverages digital technology to mobilize residents, while this case further demonstrates its specific application in the living inheritance of ICH.

As live-streaming technology was applied, the team organized this into a structured sequence of cultural interpretation, skill demonstration, and interactive creation, shifting ICH from one-way knowledge transfer toward shared cultural creation. In the 2021 Qixi Festival broadcast, instructor ZHY explained the festival's cultural origins and its qiqiao customs, turned the camera onto the paper and tools to demonstrate folding and cutting in detail, and discussed techniques with residents on screen in real time. Through this interactive teaching, she guided residents to create works carrying traditional meanings such as conjugal devotion, so that transmission moved beyond the mere imitation of technique into a fuller process of cultural understanding and emotional experience. In the 2022 Lantern Festival broadcast, as ZHY demonstrated “Tiger”-year cutting, residents exchanged techniques through live comments and combined traditional motifs with the Winter Olympics to create “Bing Dwen Dwen” paper-cuttings. This spontaneous creativity reflects the participatory culture described by Jenkins (2006). As one resident remarked, cutting a Bing Dwen Dwen oneself is more meaningful than buying one, a response that shows the regenerative capacity of ICH as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

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This digitally mediated environment further strengthens resilience through motivational feedback loops in virtual spaces. When members and residents finish a work or hold a paper-cutting exhibition, they film short videos and upload them to platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, where their friends and relatives like, share, and forward them. This peer validation enhances the makers' social reputation and sustains long-term engagement more effectively than top-down regulation. Through this process, members use peer feedback on social media to expand their influence and strengthen support networks, illustrating the digital mobilization strategies of CBO (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Wiley et al., 2023). By distributing participation across both virtual networks and physical venues, digitalization transforms residents from passive recipients into active stakeholders in ICH transmission.

From the network-sociology perspective of Manuel Castells (2010), this online–offline linkage constructs a interweaving of the “space of places” and the “space of flows” (Fig. 3). The community activity room, as a fixed “space of places” with geographic boundaries, provides a material anchor and a foundation for localized relationships. Digital media such as WeChat groups and live-streaming platforms constitute a

“space of flows” that transcends spatial and temporal constraints, enabling the circulation of information, skills, and emotions. This online–offline integration is what endows the transmission system with resilience, understood as the dynamic capacity to “plan for, resist, absorb, and adapt” to disruptive events (Koliou et al., 2020).

When external crises such as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused physical disruptions, the digital “space of flows” activated the system's redundancy and rapidity of mobilization, core dimensions of community resilience(Norris et al., 2008), allowing transmission to continue when face-to-face gatherings were suspended. This resilience did not arise automatically from the technology itself. It was the CBO that turned the community's latent cultural strengths into adaptive action (Berkes & Ross, 2013), mobilizing members through digital networks to sustain the practice. The organic integration of virtual and physical spaces thus develops systemic resilience against external disturbances and reconceptualizes the craft as a vehicle of “Heritage Community Resilience” (Fabbricatti et al., 2020), in which shared cultural memory, rituals, and customs (Wilson, 2015) combine with social networks (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015) to be converted into the community's adaptive capacity.

4.4. From Community Practice to Public Recognition: The Multidimensional Propagation of Paper-cutting as Cultural Capital

Paper-cutting, a traditional skill deeply embedded within community life, shows its vitality during festivals and folk activities, contributing to the construction of the community's lifeworld. The paper-cutting service team organizes themed creative activities based on the cultural significance of important traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Chongyang Festival, and solar terms like Bai Lu. Through these localized practices, individual artistic labor is converted into what Bourdieu (1986) terms embodied cultural capital, which is manifested through craftsmanship values such as carefulness, patience, and focus, and subsequently materialized into objectified cultural capital. These works are displayed and promoted in activity rooms and community windows. For instance, on Teacher's Day, members create a complete set of the “Twelve Zodiacs” to present to the teachers of the community's elderly university, expressing gratitude. On the Chongyang Festival, they craft various “Longevity” characters to gift to the elderly, encouraging care for older residents. During the Dragon Boat Festival, members produce patterns like Aihu and “Dragon Boat Health” to adorn the community bulletin board.

In the “Gui Mao Ying Chun” themed creation at the end of 2022, members combined the paper-cutting imagery of “Mao Rabbit Bringing Fortune” with traditional auspicious symbols like the “Longevity Peach”. As team member CJY explained, “the challenge and highlight of the rabbit pattern lie in the hair of the Mao rabbit, which requires cutting a circle of fur according to the contour, steady and accurate, making it more vivid and lovely”. This fine treatment of rabbit fur turns paper-cutting from a folk skill into a refined medium with aesthetic educational value. These creative activities foster interaction networks among community residents, facilitating both skill exchange and emotional connections. By turning personal

creations into shared works through gifting and neighborhood displays, the team builds up a shared store of this cultural resource, which prepares the way for its move into a wider public arena.

Supported by local sub-district offices and the residents' committee, the Y Community Paper-Cutting Service Team has advanced the transformation of traditional handicrafts from skill inheritance to a valuable, institutionalized cultural capital through diversified exhibition activities. In 2023, the team organized its Tenth-Anniversary Exhibition and participated in the “Juyong Mountain Moon” Mid-Autumn poetry evening, two events that expanded their practices into the wider public sphere. The success of these initiatives depended on multi-party collaboration among residents, neighborhood committees, sub-district offices, and experts, characterized by co-design and co-implementation (Della Spina, 2025; S.-K. Tan et al., 2020). The showcase, titled “Tradition and Innovation”, “Nature and Humanity”, and “Story and Expression”, featured over 300 paper-cutting works, 30 velvet paper-cutting costumes, and 12 paper-cutting umbrellas. Utilizing techniques such as “combining cutting and engraving”, the event was far from a static display because it featured dynamic paper-cutting performances and an umbrella walk show performed by elderly neighborhood women. Through this retrospective, the team elevated traditional skill inheritance to a collective ceremony charged with emotional energy.

This recognition also took institutional form. Over the years the team received a series of official honours, being named an Outstanding Volunteer Project of Changping District in 2017, a Beijing Municipal “March 8th Red Banner Collective” in 2020, and one of the sub-district’s “Ten Best Community-Based Organizations”. These honours mark the final stage in the conversion of the members' skill into cultural capital, what Meissner (2021) describes as its institutionalized form, in which embodied skill and objectified works gain formal, external recognition. Such recognition ran in two directions. From above, official honours and the backing of the sub-district office helped the team grow into a recognized community brand. From below, residents came to value the craft and the people behind it, taking part in its activities and sharing its works. Together these forms of recognition gave the organization legitimacy, resources, and the standing that kept members involved over time.

The accumulated value found fuller expression during the “Juyong Mountain Moon” Mid-Autumn poetry evening. In this public setting, team members collaborated through a division of labor where CJY oversaw overall coordination, LMX focused on design, and WYF concentrated on headwear. As the design scope for paper-cutting clothing expanded into three-dimensional spaces, members opted for chalk instead of traditional pencils, moving beyond the flat constraints of traditional displays. Integrating cultural elements like the Great Wall and Mid-Autumn, they produced 93 works. This collection featured a 4m×1.5m “Great Wall” themed robe, where detailed depictions of wall structures, watchtowers, and beacon towers conveyed the grandeur of this iconic landmark and the enduring spirit of perseverance it embodies.

This mode of display generated greater visual impact and emotional resonance than traditional displays, enacting Collins' interaction ritual in real time (Collins, 2004). When models wearing this large ceremonial robe appeared on stage, the audience's attention synchronized, establishing a shared focus.

Gasps of amazement spread among the crowd, with some spontaneously exclaiming that the paper-cutting on the models was stunning and they never imagined it could be presented this way. These responses show the shared emotional energy generated within the ritual. This progression, which began with festive motifs for community bulletin boards and led to a large ceremonial robe for a gala, marks a shift from localized skill-sharing to wider public cultural creation. This shared focus and collective experience point to how the transmission of intangible cultural heritage can foster a common cultural experience and a sense of shared identity on a wider social stage.

5. Discussion

5.1. Repositioning the CBO in Community Heritage Governance

The thirteen-year trajectory of the Y Community Paper-Cutting Service Team speaks to a broader question in heritage studies regarding how the living transmission of ICH is organized and sustained at the community level. Instead of treating transmission as the cumulative effort of individual bearers, this case foregrounds the CBO as the organizational nexus that mobilizes resources, links stakeholders, and embeds heritage practice into everyday community life. These findings resonate with the Community-Centered Heritage Sustainability Model (CCHSM) proposed by Liorančaitė-Šukienė and Jurenienė (2025), which conceptualizes community participation, multi-stakeholder collaboration, digital integration, and policy support as interconnected subsystems of sustainable transmission. The four mechanisms observed in this case, including the institutionalization of practice from spontaneous activity to community integration, intergenerational relay combined with stratified training, digital engagement across online and offline settings, and public recognition that turns embodied skill into cultural capital, offer empirical grounding for this framework. Yet this study advances the model in a key respect. Whereas the CCHSM enumerates these elements as parallel subsystems, the present case reveals that what makes them cohere is a hub actor in the form of the CBO, and more specifically, the structural embedding afforded by leaders' dual positioning across administrative and organizational domains. The contribution is to move from a checklist of subsystems toward a hub-centered account of community heritage governance.

5.2. How the Mechanisms Cohere: Self-Renewal and Affective Energy

This hub-centered dynamic can be understood through the interplay between the organization's capacity for self-renewal and its accumulation of cultural and affective value. The team's evolution from a spontaneous interest group into an institutionalized service organization shows how a community organization attains stability by settling shared activity into regular norms and routines. Its persistence, however, is not static preservation but ongoing self-renewal. Each round of teaching, exhibition, and online interaction reproduces the practice and renews its meaning for those involved. This renewal also works through space. Following Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, the team reappropriates the committee's

administrative meeting room as a lived cultural space, and in Castells' (2010) terms it links the community's “space of places” with the digital “space of flows”, extending transmission across both. In this sense, living transmission is the organization's capacity to renew itself while holding its structure together.

This renewal is not merely structural, because it operates through concrete processes of capital conversion and affective bonding. Through public exhibitions and festival performances, embodied skill is objectified into works and institutionalized through public recognition, enacting Bourdieu's (1986) forms of cultural capital. Large-scale ceremonial events, such as the anniversary exhibition and the Mid-Autumn gala, function as interaction rituals in Collins' (2004) sense, where synchronized attention and shared emotional energy crystallize into collective identity. The renewal of the practice thus finds its experiential expression in the accumulation of cultural capital and in ritual solidarity. What sustains self-renewal, at the level of lived practice, is the affective energy that binds a community of practitioners together

5.3. Boundary-Spanning Governance: Coproduction and Institutional Embedding

The external sustainability of the heritage transmission system depends on how the CBO connects to broader governance structures. The team's mobilization of residents, through volunteer service, WeChat-based teaching, and live-streaming, instantiates Ostrom's (1996) concept of coproduction within a Chinese community context, echoing Cheng et al.'s (2020) account of how Chinese CBO uses digital tools for civic mobilization. This practice aligns with the broader evolution of digital technology, which has transitioned from static information dissemination to platform-based interaction, enabling the CBO to weave heritage learning into the hybrid spaces of modern neighborhood life. The dual roles of core leaders, who are simultaneously community administrative workers and team leaders, position them as boundary spanners (Kapucu, 2006) whose embedded position channels external resources directly into grassroots practice. Digital means here are not merely technical, because as Radzuan et al. (2024) observe, community-driven digital approaches strengthen intergenerational transfer and social cohesion, a dynamic mirrored in the team's online community of practice. Such tools may also partially mitigate the problem of inheritor shortage (Guo et al., 2025), although they do not resolve it. What mattered in this case was the low threshold of the tools the team used, such as WeChat and short video, which invited ordinary residents to take part. High-threshold technologies can raise the barrier to grassroots involvement, and when digital projects are technology-led while community participation stays shallow, heritage risks being preserved in form while losing its living character (Y.-C. Tan et al., 2026).

This boundary-spanning capacity underpins the multi-stakeholder collaboration that sustains the system. The team's coordination of residents, the residents' committee, sub-district offices, and external experts substantiates the co-creative governance model articulated by Sokka et al. (2021), in which heritage value is continually redefined through civic collaboration, and aligns with Tan et al.'s (2020) emphasis on the interaction of multiple actors as the basis of ICH sustainability. The present case,

however, specifies the institutional condition under which such collaboration becomes stable instead of remaining episodic, namely the leadership's institutional anchorage within the local governance apparatus. The significance of this embedded support is clearer when set against the failed Lekhubu Island heritage project in Botswana (Lenao, 2015), where transmission stalled because key stakeholders were absent or perfunctory and external support networks remained weak. The same logic helps explain why many independent folk artisans, though highly skilled, see their crafts decline, since they lack an organizational position through which support and recognition can flow. Stable and embedded support, not the mere presence of stakeholders, emerges as the pivotal condition for community-led heritage sustainability.

5.4. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This study makes two contributions. Theoretically, it reframes the community-based social organization not merely as a site of participation but as the central hub of living heritage transmission, integrating cultural capital and interaction ritual within a single account of community heritage governance, and identifying structural embedding as the mechanism that sustains multi-stakeholder collaboration. Practically, it suggests that policies for safeguarding community heritage should prioritize cultivating locally embedded organizations with stable institutional ties, instead of focusing narrowly on technology or top-down designation. For a craft such as paper-cutting, and for community heritage more broadly, preserving the artifact matters. What sustains the practice, though, is the organizational hub that keeps it alive.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how a CBO functions as a hub in the living transmission of paper-cutting heritage. Through a qualitative case study of the Y Community Paper-Cutting Service Team in Beijing, the analysis identified four interconnected mechanisms through which the CBO sustains heritage vitality. The CBO institutionalizes the practice, relays it across generations through stratified training, extends it through digital engagement across online and offline settings, and earns public recognition that turns embodied skill into cultural capital. Together, these mechanisms show that living transmission is not the spontaneous outcome of individual effort but the product of organized, sustained community action.

Theoretically, this study repositions the CBO from a site of participation to the central hub of living heritage transmission. A key finding is that the structural embedding of CBO leaders within local governance, through dual administrative and organizational roles, is what transforms episodic collaboration into a stable, hub-governed network. The findings also carry practical implications. Policymakers should prioritize cultivating locally embedded organizations with stable institutional ties to community governance structures, instead of focusing only on technological solutions or top-down designation. The case shows that digital tools work best when embedded within an organizational ecology that connects them to face-to-face practice, intergenerational relationships, and public ritual. Investments in community heritage should target the organizational infrastructure, including leadership

development, institutional linkages, and platform support, that enables CBO to function as transmission hubs.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study draws on a single case in an urban Chinese community, and the specific institutional arrangements observed, particularly the dual administrative-organizational roles of CBO leaders, may reflect governance features particular to the Chinese community context. The transferability of these findings to other national or rural settings requires further investigation. Second, while the longitudinal scope of the case provides temporal depth, the retrospective nature of some data, where interviews recall events over thirteen years, introduces potential recall bias. Third, the aging of core inheritors and the limited participation of younger generations represent an ongoing structural challenge that this study documents but cannot fully resolve within its analytical scope.

Future research could extend this work in several directions. Comparative studies contrasting highly heterogeneous mixed urban communities with traditional, homogenous rural settings would test the boundary conditions of this hub model. Longitudinal tracking of CBO at earlier stages of formation could illuminate the process by which hub capacity develops over time. Additionally, research examining how younger generations might be recruited into heritage practice through digital-native platforms, moving beyond the WeChat-based model observed here, could address the intergenerational challenge that remains the most pressing threat to community-based ICH sustainability.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Conceptualization, B.S. and F.H.; methodology, B.S.; investigation, B.S.; data curation, B.S., Z.W., H.J. and L.T.; formal analysis, B.S.; writing—original draft preparation, B.S.; writing—review and editing, X.L. and F.H.; visualization, B.S.; resources, F.H. and R.W.; supervision, F.H.; project administration, F.H.; funding acquisition, F.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

The materials supporting the findings of this study are provided as supplementary files accompanying this article, including the semi-structured interview guide, the coding framework, and an anonymized summary of interview participants (Table 1). The raw qualitative data, including interview notes, field notes, and WeChat group records, are not publicly available because they contain personally identifiable information and sensitive details about participants and the community. Making them public would compromise the confidentiality guaranteed to participants and is restricted by the study's ethical commitments. De-identified excerpts are presented within the article to illustrate the findings. Further inquiries may be directed to the corresponding author.

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Figures

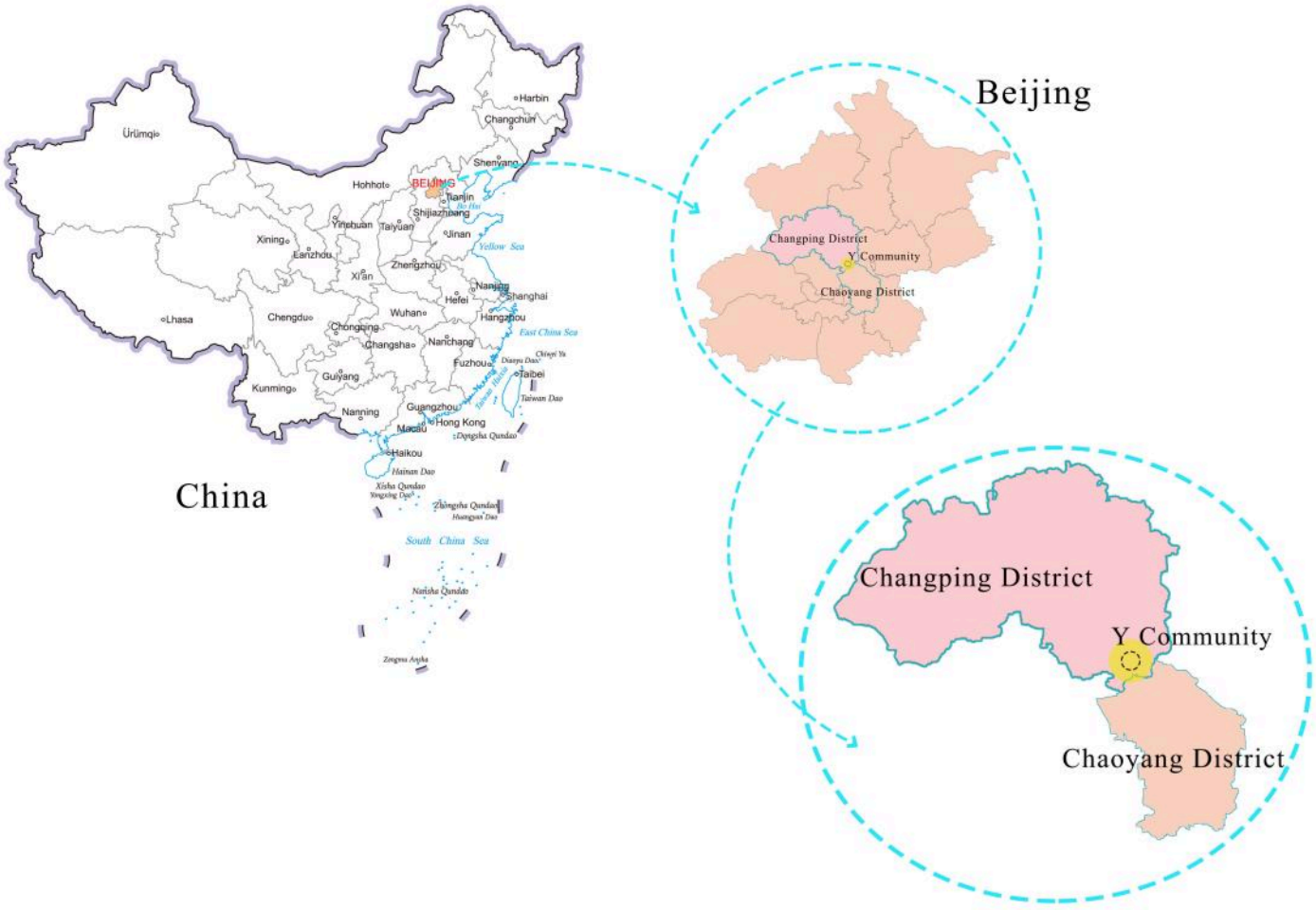


Figure 1

General situation of the study area.

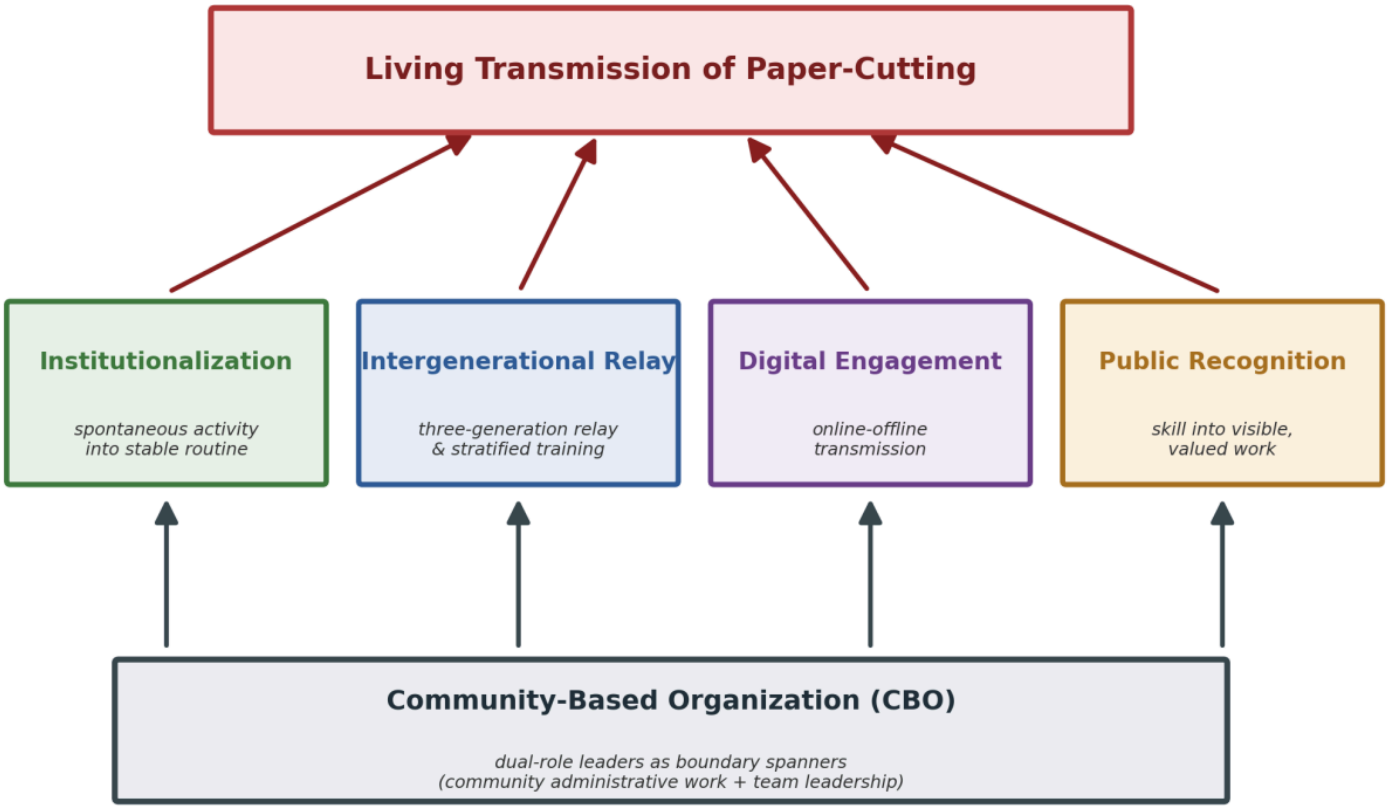


Figure 2

The CBO as a hub sustaining the living transmission of paper-cutting through four interconnected mechanisms.

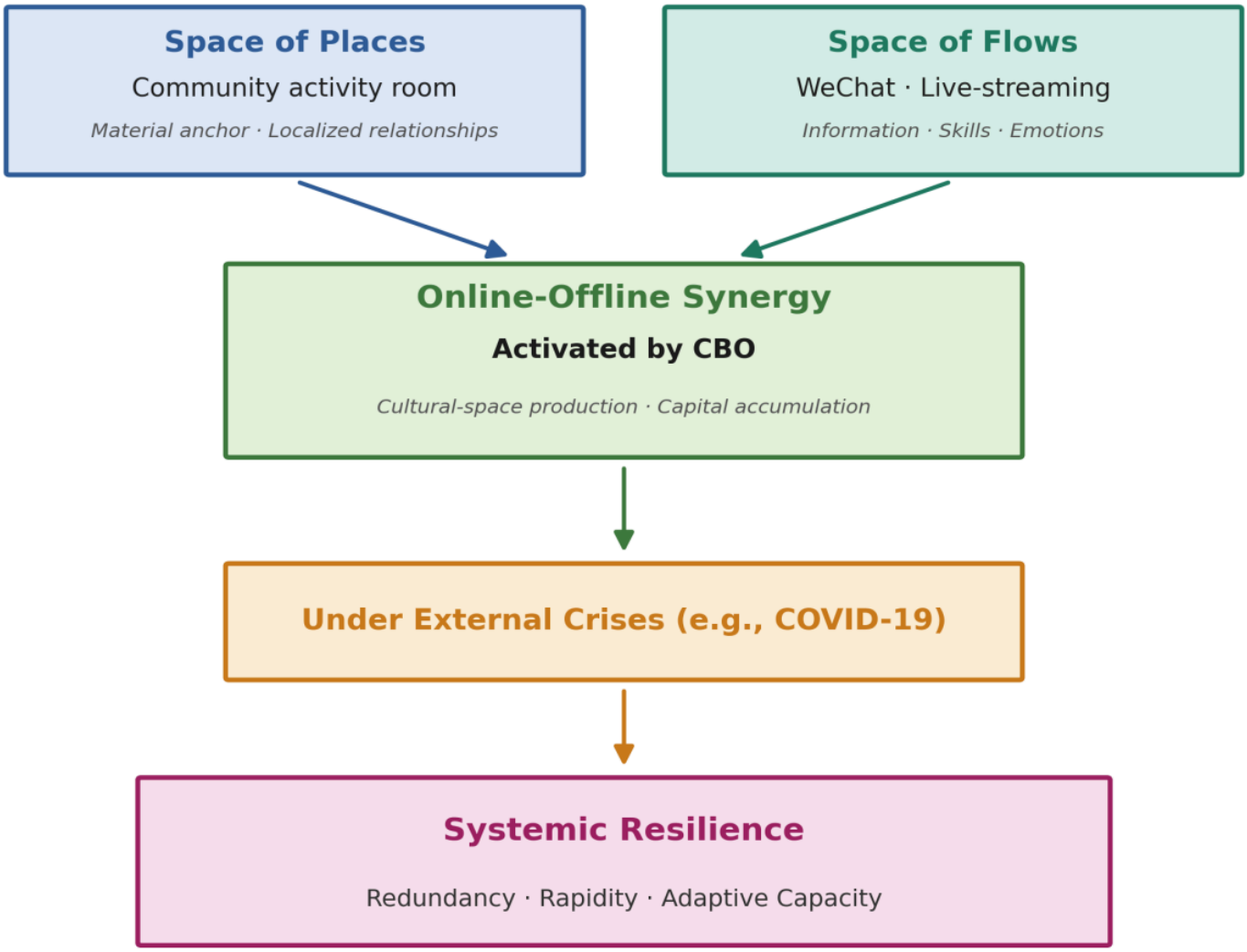


Figure 3

The Interweaving of the Space of Places and Space of Flows in ICH Transmission.

Supplementary Files

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- CodingFramework.docx
- SemiStructuredInterviewGuide.docx