

## Intergenerational Dynamics of Chinese Heritage Sports in Rural Governance: Cultural Transmission and Social Cohesion

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### ABSTRACT

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#### KEYWORDS:

Chinese Heritage Sports  
Rural Governance  
Intergenerational Dynamics

#### CITATION:

Wang, C., Hasnul Faizal Hushin Amri, & Mazlan Che Soh. (2024). Intergenerational Dynamics of Chinese Heritage Sports in Rural Governance: Cultural Transmission and Social Cohesion. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 10(2), e003012.  
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v10i2.3012>

Chinese heritage sports play a crucial role in cultural preservation and rural governance, fostering social cohesion and intergenerational continuity. However, these sports face challenges due to modernization, migration, and intergenerational conflicts, which threaten their transmission and integration into contemporary governance frameworks. This study aims to explore the role of Chinese heritage sports in rural governance from an intergenerational perspective. Specifically, it investigates the mechanisms of intergenerational conflict affecting heritage sports and their implications for rural governance practices. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining a literature review with field investigations conducted in L Village, Fujian. The study utilized participatory observation and in-depth interviews with local stakeholders, including village administrators, cultural practitioners, and residents, to analyze the transmission, challenges, and governance potential of the traditional "Songjiang Formation" heritage sport. The study reveals that intergenerational conflicts in heritage sports arise from shifts in values, marginalization due to modernization, and policy discrepancies. The transformation from familial to institutionalized and market-driven transmission models has weakened traditional mentorship structures. However, successful revitalization efforts in L Village demonstrate that heritage sports can serve as a medium for moral governance, social integration, and rural self-governance when supported by grassroots initiatives and policy interventions. Chinese heritage sports hold significant potential for fostering rural governance by bridging generational gaps and strengthening community ties. Addressing intergenerational conflicts through innovation, policy alignment, and participatory governance can ensure their

sustainable transmission and contribution to rural modernization. Future governance models should integrate heritage sports into broader socio-economic and cultural development frameworks to enhance rural resilience and cohesion.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the role of Chinese heritage sports in rural governance from an intergenerational perspective. This study uses new estimation methodology by employing a mixed-methods approach. The paper's primary contribution is finding that intergenerational conflicts impact cultural transmission, requiring policy alignment for sustainability.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, rural governance in China has become an essential component for achieving the modernization of the national governance system and capabilities. However, influenced by various factors such as the urban-rural economic development gap, the migration of rural youth to urban areas, the emergence of aging and a trend toward younger populations in rural areas, the gradual reduction in natural villages, weak awareness of village self-governance, and distant interpersonal relationships among villagers, rural governance faces severe challenges. Consequently, it has garnered continuous attention across various fields of society ([Wei & Jiang, 2016](#)). Notably, studies from disciplines such as sociology and folklore predominantly focus on traditional Chinese rural areas influenced by traditional ideologies. When the research subjects are ensnared in conflicts between survival and personal interests, it is believed that individuals' "private" concerns ([He, 2007](#)) become a significant impediment to local development and cultural inheritance. In the domain of sports science, scholars primarily investigate rural sports from the perspective of heritage subjects, particularly concerning rural heritage sports that have gradually faded from the public eye. Currently, these sports are experiencing a severe cultural heritage crisis, primarily stemming from intergenerational conflicts in subject transmission and the discontinuity in cultural continuation ([Hou, 2017](#); [Wei & Yang, 2019](#)). Therefore, the involvement of Chinese heritage sports in rural governance holds particular importance in addressing the intergenerational issues concerning heritage subjects.

Since the 1980s, following the introduction of intergenerational theory into China, scholars have predominantly described and analyzed intergenerational issues from perspectives including sociology, cultural anthropology, youth studies, and demography, with relatively limited attention from the viewpoint of sports science ([Shen, 2002](#)). Overall, current academic discourse primarily interprets intergenerational issues in sports from the following aspects: Employing diverse research methods and interdisciplinary analyzes to explore the influence of sports on intergenerational relationships ([Dong, 2010](#); [Wang et al., 2016](#)); Studies addressing intergenerational issues within specific sports-related subjects ([Wang, 2019](#); [Gao et al., 2019](#); [Wang et al., 2015](#)); And research on sports participation from an intergenerational perspective ([Yang & Gao 2021](#); [Liu, 2017](#)). In summary, existing intergenerational studies have often focused more on exploring kinship-related aspects such as family ties. There has been relatively less research investigating the transmission and governance issues related to social, professional, or interest-based relationships. Moreover, the majority of studies on current intergenerational urban issues overshadow those concerning traditional

intergenerational cultural issues in rural areas. Theoretical concerns regarding intergenerational matters have received more attention than practical problem-solving aspects, which require further research.

In July 2021, the author commenced research with a project team in L Village, Fujian (pseudonym). Situated in Xiamen City, Fujian Province, L Village boasts a picturesque environment and rich cultural heritage. The heritage sport "Songjiang Formation" has been an enduring local performance tradition that garners immense popularity among audiences, maintaining a substantial grassroot following to this day. However, in the early 1990s, seeking improved living conditions, residents from coastal areas of L Village began migrating for work to cities such as Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Jinjiang. This led to an increasingly prevalent phenomenon of "hollow villages" and left-behind elderly individuals in the village. Consequently, young enthusiasts, preoccupied with livelihood challenges, showed dwindling interest in practicing the "Songjiang Formation," leading to a crisis of succession. Simultaneously, although migrating for urban employment enhanced the material livelihood of L Village residents, it induced a significant shift in their ideologies. Trust, cooperation, and mutual assistance prevalent in the close-knit social fabric gradually diminished, weakening the cohesion within the village. Therefore, contemplating and researching ways to alter this situation becomes imperative. As widely acknowledged, Chinese heritage sports serve as an excellent carrier of local culture. They hold significant functionality and cultural value in fostering national and ethnic identity, mitigating social conflicts, promoting community harmony, facilitating village self-governance, among other aspects (Liao et al., 2020). Hence, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

- i. How is the intergenerational transmission of Chinese heritage sports conducted?
- ii. What conflicts arise during the intergenerational transmission process of Chinese heritage sports?
- iii. What insights can the participation of the Chinese heritage sport "Songjiang Formation" offer for rural governance practices?

Given these considerations, this study, starting from the perspective of the cultural inheritance of heritage sports, aims to outline the mechanisms behind intergenerational conflicts affecting the development of heritage sports. Its goal is to construct new references for the involvement of heritage sports in rural governance.

## 2. Concept of intergenerational relations

The concept of "generation" is highly complex, with different definitions existing between various disciplines and even within the same discipline. In the field of social anthropology, "generation" is often considered a principle for delineating lineage and is referred to as kinship relations (Fox, 1983). In the realm of demography, "generation" is viewed as a group of individuals sharing certain common characteristics (Jacobson, 1964). Historically, within the discipline of history, "generation" is denoted as people living in different historical periods, encompassing a wide range of social groups in this context (Kertzer, 1983).

Sociology also presents diverse disciplinary meanings of "generation." Comte (1851) believed that "generation" reflects historical development, allowing societal progress through the successive replacement of generations. Mannheim (2005) emphasized "generation location" as a social phenomenon, embedding relevant "age groups" into socio-historical processes, with class status explained through economic and social

conditions. "Generation location" is determined by specific patterns of ideas and experiences transmitted from one generation to another through the "natural data". On the other hand, [Eisenstadt \(1956\)](#) integrated the lineage meaning of "generation" with the stage-of-life meaning. Contrary to these scholars, [Ryder \(1985\)](#) proposed a different conceptual boundary for "generation," strictly confining its meaning within the context of kinship lineage. He argued that intergenerational family transmission processes should not be confused with cohort succession occurring within the same period or societal changes.

Scholars have categorized the concept of "generation" into two main types. The first, "family generations," refers to blood relations between grandparents, parents, and children, aligning with kinship structures in anthropological studies ([Fox, 1983](#)). The second, "cohort," denotes a group of individuals who share similar historical and social experiences due to being born within a specific time period ([Ryder, 1985; Mannheim, 2005](#)). Cohorts encompass individuals with analogous life experiences, socialization processes, as well as patterns of thoughts and experiences. However, the distinctions in the connotations of "generation" aforementioned are not entirely dichotomous but rather exhibit some degree of ambiguity and intersection. The succession of generations due to natural laws and biological factors serves as the fundamental premise and prerequisite for the issue of "generation." Individuals born in the same era or sharing the same age are assigned similar positions within societal and historical processes, thereby constraining their potential experiences within a certain framework. As societal dynamics accelerate and rapid societal changes occur, the potential for divergence and rupture in specific thought patterns and accumulated experiences among members of different generations increases.

[Mead \(1970\)](#) analyzed intergenerational issues by combining macro-historical perspectives with micro-life trajectories. She asserted that while intergenerational issues indeed reflect conflicts between generations at different stages of life, these conflicts are primarily intertwined with intergenerational cultural transmission patterns. Generational succession is an objective demographic reality, yet when associated with sociology and cultural anthropology, it becomes a process wherein individuals from different social positions pass on shared experiences and cultural values to subsequent generations, termed as intergenerational transmission. Thus, intergenerational transmission emerges as a product of societal and cultural change, not solely confined to age-related matters but also exploring issues related to societal attributes—specifically, the search for memory in the selection of behavioral paradigms.

[Mead \(1970\)](#) identified three distinct cultural transmission patterns in intergenerational cultural inheritance: post-symbolic culture, reciprocal-symbolic culture, and pre-symbolic culture. In the post-symbolic culture phase, elders accumulate various knowledge and skills about societal life but lack innovation, offering the younger generation an accumulation of unchanging information. During the reciprocal-symbolic culture phase, societal transformations necessitate cultural exchanges between different generations, especially among contemporaries, to facilitate societal change. In the pre-symbolic culture phase, older generations need to learn from the younger generation, as the youth establish new authority in novel aspects of societal development. The changes in types of intergenerational relationships do not follow a linear natural developmental process. Changes in intergenerational relationships during different periods result in the reconstruction and adjustment of relationships between members of different generations, thereby potentially generating intergenerational conflicts. In contemporary

Chinese society, a transition is observed from reciprocal-symbolic culture to pre-symbolic culture. This shift reflects broader social changes, where traditional rural and family-based authority structures are gradually weakening, and younger generations are gaining discourse power through modernization and technological advancement.

Fei (2019) emphasized that as Chinese society moves towards modernization, the hierarchical structure of generational authority is increasingly challenged, leading to shifts in intergenerational relationships. Similarly, Li and Wu (2021) pointed out that the decline of traditional kinship-based governance and the rise of new social structures have intensified generational tensions, as younger individuals seek to redefine their roles within both family and society. Therefore, guiding the transformation and succession of cultural transmission patterns and intergenerational relationships through communication mechanisms becomes a crucial topic during this period.

### 3. Methodology

This paper also applies gender analysis, comparative analysis to explore the practice of Chinese heritage sports in rural governance through an Intergenerational perspective.

#### 3.1. Literature methods

This study used Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) library, Google Scholar, and China Knowledge journal database to review the relevant literature, and read the relevant heritage sports books related to intergenerational research. It provides an important reference for the content of this study and accumulates a certain theoretical foundation. The literature and materials collected and organized by the author mainly include the following categories: 1) The latest academic research results of the intergenerational theories at home and abroad, the collection and sorting of which can help the preliminary theoretical reserve of this study. 2) Literature on the current status of research on heritage sports. 3) Literature on the current status of research on the cultural and historical origins of the "Songjiang Formation". 4) Relevant policy documents on the revival of traditional culture in China. 5) Research materials on the formation process of the local society and the social and cultural characteristics of the clans. 6) Archival materials related to the process of reviving the "Songjiang Formation" culture in L village.

#### 3.2. Field survey law

In accordance with the purpose and content of the study, field interviews and surveys were conducted with participants in the "Songjiang Formation", a heritage sport in L village: 1) Anthropological participatory observation, entering the village of L to conduct a comprehensive, detailed, in-depth and solid field survey on the activities of the heritage sport "Songjiang Formation", and making comprehensive use of mobile phones, voice recorders, laptops and other tools to collect, collate and obtain a wealth of first-hand research data. 2) In-depth interviews were conducted with the administrators of L village, the curator of the "Songjiang Formation" museum, coaches, players and villagers on the basis of establishing a good relationship, to learn about the development history of the "Songjiang Formation" in L village, the process of the ceremony, the cultural connotation as well as the research information on the transformation.

## 4. Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Memory in Chinese Heritage Sports

### 4.1. The Collective Labor Mode Determines the Intergenerational Cultural Transmission in the Family-Centric System

Chinese people emphasize the importance of family, and within society, the family holds a unique position, gradually forming a lifestyle primarily centered around kinship groups (Wang, 2009). Culturally, family-based groups, driven by relentless effort and dedication, transform a means of livelihood into a family craft passed down through generations. Traditional familial structures, primarily centered on the family, serve not only as a communal living entity but also as a shared productive unit. All family members are tightly bound by economic, ethical, and legal relationships, demonstrating a primacy of familial values (Wang et al., 2010).

This intertwining of blood relations and shared interests constitutes the initial form of familial inheritance. Building upon previous scholars' research on this form of inheritance, firstly, familial inheritance primarily relies on the transmission within the family, often occurring in secretive or semi-public spaces. For the sake of survival, this fosters a monopoly over particular skills or techniques. Secondly, this form of inheritance often involves the transfer of skills among direct family members or within the family's closed circle, following cultural customs such as not transmitting to those outside the family, keeping it within the lineage, or restricting transmission based on gender.

However, due to the limitations imposed by the underdeveloped productivity and limited cultural awareness at the time, this form of familial inheritance centered on the family was unable to keep pace with societal development, manifesting evident shortcomings in its transmission. In instances where the next generation lacks male heirs or is unwilling to inherit such livelihood methods, this can result in a crisis or even extinction of familial inheritance. In times of social unrest, family skills evolved from solely serving family interests into a form of social capital. This transformation, evolving beyond the family sphere, embodies a seeking of survival and development, leading to the expansion of inheritance outside the familial realm - known as simulated familial inheritance, specifically through mentor-apprentice relationships.

The master-apprentice inheritance is the primary mode of heritage inheritance in China, formed by masters and apprentices following specific norms and requirements, establishing an activity based on a particular skill, and representing a principal form of historical continuation of folk arts (Wei & Jiang, 2016). In a sense, the bloodline-based transmission between father and son and the master-apprentice inheritance share a connection of "kinship between master and disciple," belonging to the lineage-based inheritance system. Consequently, the master-apprentice inheritance has adhered to strict selection and entry criteria since ancient times, emphasizing the importance of "selecting the worthy for imparting esoteric knowledge," forming a code for its transmission. The transmission of family skills involves a prolonged nurturing process; selecting suitable apprentices is crucial to prevent the skills from diminishing. It involves scrutiny not only of physicality and skills but also of moral character, quality, and determination.

The master-apprentice inheritance, replacing bloodline inheritance, became the mainstream in society at that time and persisted for an extended period, following its

own rules of continuity: First, simulated familial transmission through the master-apprentice system, utilizing the "family" as a carrier, with moral constraints, facilitating temporal continuity; Second, skill transmission expanded beyond bloodline constraints, broadening the scope of selection and enduring across time, fostering a deeper development toward refinement, purity, and specialization; Third, the master-apprentice relationship is a voluntary association with a strong sense of shared values, reflecting a certain degree of social cohesion, serving as a true starting point for the societal inheritance of heritage sports culture. However, this social cohesion, evolving into a form of social power, internally emanates warmth and compassion but externally exhibits strong cultural exclusivity. In some ways, this inhibits the normal integration and supplementation between schools of thought, restricting the expansion of the transmission target for these schools, demonstrating its historical limitations.

#### **4.2. The Collective Teaching Model Determines the Intergenerational Transmission of Affiliation Covenant System in Reciprocal-Symbolic Cultural Heritage**

With the passage of time, there has been a gradual transformation in the (simulated) bloodline inheritance method. According to records, collective martial arts activities were documented as early as the Xia Dynasty. This collective teaching model differed externally from the pure master-apprentice transmission method (Yuan, 2009). In the pre-Qin era, Confucian scholars included archery in the "Six Arts," considering it a significant subject for gentlemen to study and be assessed upon (Li, 2006). Literary works such as Xin Shu by Zhuge Liang, Li Weigong's Inquiry by Li Jing from the early Tang Dynasty, and New Book of Discipline by Qi Jiguang from the Ming Dynasty offer insightful perspectives on military education and training (Qi, 1560). During the era of cold weapons, military training was initially passed down by leaders or invited martial arts instructors. In the Song Dynasty, specialized "instructors" for practicing martial arts emerged, focusing primarily on the study and practice of martial skills, significantly contributing to improving training levels and weaponry skills (Ma, 1993).

Post the Opium Wars, traditional military arts gradually gave way to firearms during warfare (Xue & Yang, 2009). In the 1920s and 1930s, with the invasion of Western sports culture, the transmission methods of Chinese martial arts underwent a transformation, witnessing the emergence of a Western curriculum-based teaching model (Yuan, 2009). Around the time of the Xinhai Revolution, driven by the ideology of "a strong nation requires a strong population," numerous martial arts societies emerged in many cities to attract martial arts professionals (Wang, 2015). With the establishment of modern sports education in China, traditional martial arts were officially incorporated into school physical education, becoming a part of school sports curricula and transitioning towards a "school-class teaching model".

Schools are the grassroots organizational forms responsible for implementing public functions in China. From the establishment of Jingwu Physical Culture School by Huo Yuanjia and others to the formation of a comprehensive competitive system in sports martial arts schools after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and further to the Ministry of Education's issuance and revision of a series of physical education syllabi, which transformed martial arts subjects into formal courses under the category of national traditional sports, the transmission mode of traditional sports culture in China has shifted from closed and conservative to open and efficiently improved. This transformation has empowered students' active roles in education and

changed the longstanding position of martial arts practitioners from being mere subjects in the process of teaching. According to [Wang and Liu \(2013\)](#), school education is primarily government-led and relies on agreed standards and technical knowledge learning. Its essence lies in being a comprehensive and profound affiliation covenant relationship.

With the societal differentiation emerging, as national traditional sports programs are integrated into physical education curricula, the spaces previously monopolized by those benefiting from inherent identities are squeezed. The populace (schools), through the realization of their subject status, has propelled China's transition from identity to contract, promoting the acquisition of knowledge (skills) based on equal, respectful, and cooperative affiliation covenant relationships. In contrast to the traditional martial arts' transmission through "invisible experience," school education endeavors to standardize martial arts gradually and systematically, aligning them with international sports trends. Moving from the traditional master-apprentice transmission mode to school education, research indicates that the latter possesses unified technical standards and scientific management, enabling the attainment of optimal order, and enhancing both economic and social benefits.

#### **4.3. Cultural Assimilation Modes Determine Fore-symbolic Cultural Transmission in Public Sphere Dissemination**

[Herskovits \(1958\)](#) argued that continuous direct contact between individuals from different cultures results in the transformation of one or both original cultural forms, a process he termed as "cultural assimilation." This concept was later elaborated in his work on African and Caribbean cultures, where he described the mechanisms of acculturation and adaptation. In a stable society, kinship is a stabilizing force, and geographical proximity is merely a reflection of kinship, where proximity reflects kinship relations ([Fei, 2019](#)). However, in a consumerist society, due to increased mobility, the original bonds of kinship and geographical ties tend to disintegrate.

Apprenticeship transitions from familiar relationships to interactions with strangers, resulting in a geometric increase in numbers, transforming transmission into a profession. According to [Wang et al. \(2010\)](#), geographical transmission within specific regional environments has undergone two distinctly different periods: first, a primitive state within the community where kinship and geographical ties became a "socialized space," and second, the emergence of social mobility within classes generating distinct collective unconscious features within the regional "latent culture." The advent of private ownership led to weakened clan control over the "socialized space," accelerating population mobility, transitioning from a singular aggregation in the same geographical area to groupings of various lineages, fostering geographical cultural assimilation.

[Ratzel \(1882-1891\)](#) introduced the "cultural circle methodology" (Kulturreislehre) to explain the geographical diffusion of cultural elements. His study of African archery history revealed striking similarities in widely distant regions, often attributed to ethnic migrations and cultural diffusion, exceeding expectations in their degree of influence. Building on this foundation, [Frobenius \(1923\)](#) further examined "associative phenomena" and "universal similarities," demonstrating that such patterns extended beyond weaponry like bows and arrows to numerous other cultural expressions, reinforcing the idea of cultural morphology. Within these migratory "associative phenomena" and "universal similarities" of heritage sports, not only was cross-regional

and interethnic transmission achieved, but the scope of cultural assimilation expanded, solidifying the foundation of cultural practices. Furthermore, this broadened the structure of intergenerational transmission and fostered more flexible age structures, not confined solely to the transmission from older to younger generations but also encompassing peer-to-peer technical and experiential exchange to a certain extent.

During the transition from closed traditional societies to open modern societies, the traditional spatial structure of the "unit system" presented a dispersed state. People gradually liberate themselves from the constraints of family and village traditions, strengthening their proactivity and positivity in constructing interpersonal relationships, that is, their collective activities. In sociological studies, interpersonal network relationships have been analyzed through multiple frameworks. Traditional Confucian thought outlines the "Five Relationships" (Wulun), emphasizing the hierarchical and reciprocal nature of social bonds ([Confucius, ca. 479 BCE](#)). In modern sociology, network theories suggest that professional relationships, formed by individuals sharing the same occupation or educational background, contribute significantly to career mobility and social capital ([Granovetter, 1973](#)). This professional bond is not inherent in humans but results from a complex social structure formed by extensive social division of labor, where people engage in collective activities linked by their professions.

Evidently, professional relationships play a catalytic role in social development, broadening the scope of transmission among the populace. Through adaptable social division of labor and vocational needs, it expands action trajectories from local to broader extents, creating a "social ecological network" that strengthens from weak to robust ([Guo, 2007](#)). When people's material living standards reach a certain level, the emphasis on spiritual and cultural demands becomes apparent. When expanding interpersonal communication and enhancing quality of life becomes a normal need, the occupational confinement restricting individuals' development becomes evident. As a result, relationships formed based on similar interests emerge—known as "Hobby Relationships". These relationships not only construct their "social ecological network" but also provide "instrumental rewards" and "expressive rewards" ([Fang, 2012](#)). Characterized by physical proximity and social interaction, the "Hobby Relationship" movement is immensely popular among the public. Its members emulate, unite, and even exhibit intergenerational interaction known as "cultural feedback" in traditional sports ([Zhou & Li, 2014](#)).

## 5. Intergenerational Conflict Predicament in Chinese Heritage Sports

### 5.1. The Conflict of Values Resulting in Erosion and Transformation of Chinese Heritage Sports

In traditional Chinese society, kinship-based primacy systems, particularly the "paternal clan system," played a central role in structuring social and political life. [Fei \(2019\)](#) emphasized that Chinese rural communities were fundamentally organized around lineage networks, where the patriarchal clan determined family hierarchy and social obligations. Similarly, [Hsiao \(1979\)](#) argued that the clan system extended beyond familial structures into governance and legal traditions, reinforcing Confucian norms. Furthermore, [Huang \(1985\)](#) examined how the paternal clan system shaped property inheritance and intergenerational relations in Qing China. This system emphasized individual responsibilities and obligations. The early agrarian communities faced harsh natural conditions and primitive production tools, making it impossible for individuals

to survive independently. Consequently, communal labor became the primary means of production and livelihood, fostering interactions and exchanges among individuals. Communal labor served not only as a survival strategy but also as a perpetuating bond that intertwined economic interests with ethical obligations, passed down through generations.

However, with social advancement and the improvement of productivity, the once rigid paternal clan-based transmission system became increasingly fragile, accentuating conflicts within the system and leading to impediments in its continuity. The stages of primacy conflict in traditional Chinese society encompassed: First, inheritance conflict centered on family primacy and hereditary legacy. The characteristic of bloodline inheritance, where certain skills were exclusively passed down through males or within the family lineage, led to conflicts when no suitable heir existed or when the next generation was reluctant to continue the heritage. Second, conflicts arose within the hierarchical mentorship system, a widening of the apprentice-master lineage, which transitioned from selecting and receiving apprentices to a gradual process of intimate transmission. Due to the limitations imposed by the master's ability to instruct every apprentice, it often led to discrepancies in the mentor's teachings between different disciples, creating conflicts in knowledge transfer within this system. Third, unconscious cultural conflicts stemming from regional mobility: Disparities in external environments fostered distinct lifestyle habits and customs among individuals in different regions. The emergence of private property accelerated labor migration, leading to the aggregation of various ethnic groups within the same geographical areas. These conflicting regional cultures gradually amalgamated through interactions and conflicts, fostering cultural integration.

Traditional society's primacy conflicts regarding heritage sports culture development can be considered both advantageous and disadvantageous, requiring a dual perspective for comprehensive evaluation. On one hand, examining the inherent interests within the mentor-disciple relationship, instances of migration might lead to incomplete skill transmission due to the deliberate alteration of teaching techniques by the master, either due to forgetfulness or for concealing their identity, as noted by scholars [Zhou & Li \(2014\)](#). The movie "Master" depicted the decline of martial arts, highlighting the realization of Zheng Shan, the head of the Tianjin Wuxing Guild: "The martial arts school is not producing talents because we are not teaching the real deal." Prioritizing personal interests at the expense of impeding the comprehensive development of heritage sports is detrimental both in the short and long term, ultimately leading to outcomes such as the leading character in "Master," Zheng Shan, leaving for Brazil to grow cocoa while Tianjin's martial arts schools were reorganized by the military.

On the other hand, when reviewing cultural transformation and innovation following the migration of the subject, after the transmission of the Fujian martial arts parade to Taiwan, various alterations occurred in content, form, performance numbers, technical movements, and even names, partially due to different reasons. This transformation included changes reflecting cultural conflicts among similar resources post-migration, compelling adjustments in the content and form of heritage sports. For instance, the Fujian martial arts parade, known for its tradition of "Lose the game, not the parade; losing the parade is losing face," led the masters to innovate forms and formations to secure victory, either by increasing the difficulty or adding thrill, presenting innovative styles and formations. This highlights how conflicts between similar cultural resources after subject migration could induce necessary modifications in the content and form of

heritage sports. The stakeholders' rational assessment of heritage sports culture is influenced by factors such as clan affiliations, factions, and parade heads. The greater the number of these influences, the more intense and beneficial the competitive conflicts are, contributing to a better continuation and propagation of the tradition.

## 5.2. Ideological conflicts leading to marginalization of Chinese heritage sports

As productivity continues to advance, the migration of the younger population towards cities has led to a gradual erosion of the clan mentality. The original kinship and territorial relationships have started to disintegrate, shifting the mode of transmission in heritage sports from familial (mentor-disciple) inheritance to interactions among strangers (teacher-student). "At present, the enthusiasm for martial arts in villages is not strong. Some children are not very enthusiastic about practicing martial arts. When I teach martial arts at school in the evening, I have to give the children ten yuan. They are only interested when they are paid... Why do I give money in the evening? Because if I give it during the day, they will not come after school." Compared to Zhong Tuanyu practicing the Jin Douyang She is ethnic boxing when he was young, the present-day children engaging in martial arts training at schools exhibit more purpose-oriented traits (Guo et al., 2020).

Shilling and Mellor (1998) suggest that the existence of cultural conflict does not necessarily indicate cultural integration; rather, it necessitates a certain transformation. Hou (2017) similarly emphasizes that changes in production and lifestyle require changes in traditional concepts. In the transmission of heritage sports, the "free" bequeathal of skills to descendants by ethnic groups contrasts sharply with providing "paid" products to students as part of the school curriculum, reflecting a conflict of inheritance concepts between traditional and consumer societies, particularly the significant generational gap in the free ancestral legacy ideology.

In the face of globalization's opportunities and challenges, particularly amid the backdrop of clashes and integration between Eastern and Western cultures, heritage sports have not experienced a theoretical boom. Instead, their trend towards marginalization has persisted, as Western-dominated global sports structures increasingly overshadow indigenous and heritage sports (Giulianotti, 2004). With continuous socioeconomic development, people's demands for quality of life have gradually escalated, and the demand for participation in sports has become broad and diverse. In contrast to heritage sports, competitive sports centered around the Olympics have rapidly spread throughout the country, establishing their status, whether in terms of sports forms or cultural concepts.

However, China's heritage sports culture is facing a conflict of ideologies where the older generation of boxing masters is quietly passing away while the younger generation is unwilling to inherit. Chen Zhenglei, in exploring the commercialized teaching models of Chen-style Tai Chi, stated, "Many old boxing masters have devoted their lives to the cause of martial arts, teaching so many disciples and students. However, they live in such poverty in their old age that they can hardly support themselves" (Hou, 2017). It is evident that, firstly, "getting started is difficult; mastering it is not easy." The younger generation moving away from rural areas for work finds it challenging to engage in complex heritage sports in their limited leisure time. Secondly, outdated and unappealing martial arts teaching content and a lack of diverse structures somewhat alienate the learning content from the primary learning environment of schools. Lastly,

"teachers unable to teach, students uninterested in learning." Influenced by Western sports ideologies, school physical education primarily focuses on modern sports activities.

Traditional sports teaching situations are not promising, leading to a decreasing number of students opting for heritage activities in schools. Heritage sports differ significantly from Western competitive sports in terms of athletic characteristics, cultural concepts, and value pursuits. Faced with the development trend of modern sports, China, as a vital member of the global family, desires to showcase itself through the Olympic Games, the world's largest sports platform. This ambition inevitably leads to a certain "cultural adjustment" towards traditional cultures like heritage sports, to some extent differentiating the public's willingness to participate in heritage sports.

## **6. The intergenerational transmission of heritage sports in conflict due to policy discrepancies**

From a macro perspective, policies function as intermediate variables between state institutions and societal realities, mediating governance objectives and social responses. [Lasswell \(1951\)](#) argued that policy acts as a bridge between governmental intentions and public needs, shaping administrative decisions. Cultural policies specifically refer to the administrative institutions' regulations and principles established for cultural domain issues within a given era and societal context. Since ancient times, the dissemination of heritage sports has primarily thrived among the lower echelons of society, establishing a certain foundation within the "social ecological network." Hence, heritage sports are often influenced by political power, and political authorities can even alter the transmission and survival of certain skills, a phenomenon particularly pronounced in traditional societies.

In Taiwan's secular society, traditional martial arts formations (known as "wu Formation") were forced to adapt due to political motives and governmental suppression. Firstly, following Zheng Chenggong's failure in resisting the Qing dynasty's forces, these formations clandestinely continued martial arts training, such as the Song Jiang formation, amassing strength while awaiting an opportunity for resurgence. Secondly, the official attitude also significantly affected traditional martial arts formations in Taiwan. The Kuomintang government, out of security concerns, targeted Southern Fujian culture, implementing misguided cultural policies that suppressed heritage martial arts formations ([Guo & Guo, 2006](#)). Similarly, in Fujian, which serves as the cultural base for the Song Jiang formation, during the late Ming and early Qing periods, many people in the urban and rural areas of Quanzhou supported Zheng Chenggong's anti-Qing restoration movement. However, due to the Qing government's oppressive policies, they could not openly establish organizations or practice martial arts. Instead, they set up "hidden training halls" and continued the practice of martial arts through ritualistic performances aimed at rallying supporters while maintaining the tradition of martial arts practice ([Guo et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, these policies of suppression disrupted the mass aggregation associated with heritage sports at that time in China and altered the ways in which regional cultural assimilation occurred.

The implementation of the "Five-One-Two" command signified the beginning of military control within China's sports system, causing a significant slowdown in the sports industry. [Li \(2008\)](#) argued that this policy led to centralized decision-making, reducing flexibility in sports administration and commercial development. Under the influence of

these unique circumstances, including heritage sports, both industry affinity and recreational affinity transmission suffered varying degrees of disruption. After experiencing cultural disruptions and ruins, a strong desire for revitalization emerged within society during a period of renewed openness.

The Reform and Opening Up not only ushered in institutional transformations but also brought about changes in societal structure and cultural domains. The inheritance of outstanding ethnic cultural traditions carries profound political and cultural significance. The Chinese government has implemented various projects to rescue and protect traditional ethnic sports. These include the establishment of national cultural ecological protection areas, legislative measures such as the Law on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage ([National People's Congress of China, 2011](#)), and specific policies like the Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage ([Ministry of Culture of China, 2012](#)). Additionally, the Notice on Declaring the First Batch of National-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Works ([Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China, 2006](#)) has played a crucial role in formally recognizing ethnic sports as part of China's intangible cultural heritage framework. Heritage sports, as a subcategory of ethnic and heritage sports, naturally falls within the purview of these rescue and protection efforts.

Over the years, through national efforts in excavation, organization, protection, and development, China has achieved remarkable success in the overall protection and inheritance of heritage sports, drawing considerable attention. However, looking closely at the details, there are certain inadequacies in the compatibility between the "self-will" of heritage sports and the dialog of government-level power. For instance: biasing economic government objectives as equivalent to developmental objectives for heritage sports; using heritage sports as political capital, leading to the substitution of official culture for heritage culture and a lack of macro guidance from the government and basic public service provision in heritage sports activities. Consequently, the nationalization of heritage sports has transformed its "improvement" into "organizing the people by region and integrating them into various levels of political power organs," losing the foundational consensus of the intrinsic value of heritage sports. This has caused discomfort in intergenerational value concepts, making its inheritance "taste different."

## 7. The Practical Insights of Chinese Heritage Sports in Rural Governance

### 7.1. Transition from Intergenerational Inheritance to Intergenerational Innovation in Heritage Sports: A Shift towards Autonomous Governance

In recent years, China's productivity has seen a significant increase, closely related to the rise in urbanization rates. Urban areas have absorbed the majority of rural elite groups, causing rural areas to lose their productive capacity. Rural elites settling in urban areas have reduced their connections with villages, no longer concerning themselves with the recognition of their villages or finding sustenance in rural life. This situation has led to a vacuum in rural governance and increased internal conflicts.

Confronting this crisis of heritage, Village L has embarked on a path of revival. Firstly, with strong government support, the Songjiang Formation Cultural Research Association was established in 2010, reviving a number of lost Songjiang Formation techniques. Secondly, the association actively engages in cultural activities like "Respecting the Elderly, Educating the Young," establishing "Elderly Homes" to address

the living and activity needs of the elderly, thus safeguarding the group of instructors. It promotes the "Songjiang Formation in Schools" initiative to cultivate a responsible and committed young generation. Lastly, by constructing the Songjiang Formation heritage Cultural Plaza and organizing events like the "Martial Arts Assembly," it has strengthened connections and cooperation with external entities. The series of revival measures taken by Village L in Fujian Province serve as a valuable reference on how traditional sports can participate in rural governance in China. However, they also bring forth a new developmental issue: how can traditional sports in the new era better inherit and transcend their past practices?

As society progresses, individuals are primarily reliant on "collective memory" for self-entertaining performances. Despite performances continuing, the audience has dwindled. Heritage sports and games no longer constitute the sole spiritual feast for people but rather serve as an entity upholding a certain form of "collective memory". Therefore, addressing issues regarding public involvement is pivotal in the continuity and development of heritage sports. The development of heritage sports involves a continual movement and adaptation of cultures. [Herskovits \(1941\)](#) proposed the concept of "cultural Creolization," leading to transformations in one or both original cultural forms. Similarly, [Zhou \(2004\)](#) studied interethnic cultural exchanges, suggesting that encounters between two ethnic groups either generate new ethnic cultures, assimilate one group into another, or produce multiple ethnic cultures. Hence, rather than passively assimilating, it is preferable to actively engage in integration, adaptation, and achieve innovation.

#### *7.1.1. Customs progress along with the advancement of society.*

Shifting from conflicts involving malicious brawls for resources to benign competition through mutual learning across different regions and generations, achieving a transformation in nature and function is the key to the survival of contemporary heritage sports. The Songjiang Formation Cultural Research Association from Village L in Fujian Province has frequently engaged in cultural exchanges with various martial arts styles such as Wuzuquan and Tai Chi, collaborating with martial arts schools in Taiwan, Jiangxi, and Fujian provinces. This initiative has facilitated the integration and development of Songjiang Formation with traditional martial arts, leveraging strengths and compensating for weaknesses, nurturing a group of young talents adept at adapting to the development of heritage sports in the new era.

#### *7.1.2. Tradition is an invention; what then are the innovation standards for heritage sports?*

Heritage sports transmit numerous cultural concepts, patterns, and templates embedded in daily life through physical expressions to ethnic group members, continually reinforcing the group's values and ethics. It serves as a cultural activity awakening the collective memory of the group ([Wei & Jiang, 2016](#)). The author asserts that due to various influences from external cultures, heritage sports are bound to undergo a process of "cultural creation." Whether resulting in the loss of traditional culture or the invention of new traditions, the innovation standard for heritage sports remains in the stability and enduring nature of "collective memory." Presently, there is a strong national advocacy for the comprehensive rejuvenation of traditional culture. However, the predecessors are the inheritors of heritage sports culture, yet they are rarely its innovators. In the context of globalization, mere recounting of "past historical events" is no longer sufficient for the revival of heritage sports. Instead, it requires the

introduction of a new generation of inheritors to "nourish the culture" and adapt traditions to suit societal development.

### 7.1.3. *How can heritage sports better prepare for the future?*

For heritage sports to sustain and develop continuously, it is crucial not only to innovate constantly to adapt to society but also to focus on professional promotion and cultivate a dedicated participant base, ensuring that both the Chinese nation and even the world are aware of this aspect of heritage sports. Despite extensive media coverage of events like the "Martial Arts World Tour" held in L Village, Fujian Province, commercialized operations for cross-regional dissemination have yet to emerge. In the era of new media, a flexible and diverse "network governance model" poses both challenges and opportunities for heritage sports culture. In relatively closed rural societies with low cultural literacy, it is an almost insurmountable challenge for villagers to manage the new technological platform of new media solely by their own efforts. Therefore, attracting the younger generation of inheritors to engage, understand, and participate in heritage sports culture, combining modern professional knowledge with traditional culture, is essential to making the innovated heritage sports culture known to the outside world.

## 7.2. Transformation of Heritage Sports from Intergenerational Conflict to Intergenerational Cohesion through Moral Governance

[Durkheim \(1997\)](#) distinguished social cohesion into mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. He argued that mechanical solidarity exists in traditional, underdeveloped societies, where cohesion is based on homogeneity and shared beliefs, while organic solidarity arises in modern societies with increased division of labor, leading to interdependence among individuals. In response to the intense social conflicts triggered by rapid industrialization in 19th-century Europe, Durkheim proposed a theory of social cohesion aimed at mitigating social fragmentation and restoring order. His work emphasized that achieving societal stability requires fostering collective consciousness and moral regulation. Hence, the transformation from social conflict to social cohesion is based on acquiring cultural identification, prompting members to engage in societal division of labor, forming relationships of equal cooperation and mutual aid, which drive stable societal development.

In the 1990s, driven by economic interests, villagers from Fujian's L Village migrated for work, leading to changing ideologies. Trust, cooperation, and mutual aid previously prevalent in a society of acquaintances began to erode, weakening the village's cohesion. Entrepreneur LLS (pseudonym) returning to L Village for business upheld the spirit of filial piety, loyalty to the nation, and amicable neighboring advocated by the traditional Songjiang Formation. They revived Songjiang Formation culture and organized martial arts events in the village, using the Songjiang Formation Martial Arts Association to reconstruct collective consciousness among homogenous individuals, enhancing cultural identity among villagers for the heritage sport Songjiang Formation, thereby rekindling social cohesion within the village. Moreover, entrepreneurs, members of the project expert group, government officials, and others returning to L Village for entrepreneurship based on shared interests and vocational relationships also contributed to the village's development. This participation enhanced the modernization of L Village and reinforced interdependence in societal division of labor throughout the village's development process, leading to genuine social cohesion.

At present, rural China remains in a transitional phase from a semi-closed traditional society to a modern industrial society. Mechanical solidarity, grounded in a strong 'collective consciousness,' is formed through cultural identity among different members. Consequently, addressing conflicts of family interests, constructing cultural identities among homogeneous individuals, and contributing to the development of rural communities pose significant challenges. Insights from the governance transformation in L village in Fujian are as follows:

- a) Initiating human development through the bodily construction of participants in heritage sports activities. Previously, individuals in L village were scattered and morally astray. Although most villagers were members of the L family, family trivialities often disrupted family unity or even led to conflicts. By revitalizing Songjiang Formation (a type of heritage martial arts) cultural practices and leveraging traditional values such as 'tolerance, neighborliness, respect for the elderly,' activities like 'respecting the elderly and nurturing the young,' free Songjiang Formation campus events, and regular cultural exchange events were organized annually. These activities enabled villagers to fully recognize the sense of honor and responsibility derived from folk society. This profound exploration of heritage sports culture aligned with modern rural governance effectively prevented moral decay. Moreover, the value norms inherent in heritage sports resolved numerous inter-neighborhood or intra-family conflicts that legal or institutional measures could not address, transforming intergenerational conflicts into intergenerational unity.
- b) Heritage sports are a process that unifies homogeneous and heterogeneous individuals (organizations). With the return of grassroots elites in L village and the establishment of Songjiang Formation Martial Arts Association and other grassroots organizations, a community formed through geographical, occupational, kinship, and interest-based connections has met the development needs across cultural, social, and economic domains. Government officials, decision-makers, and managers facilitate societal-level development, while experts in research domains cater to cultural needs. Importantly, villagers in local communities like L village, not only inherited local traditional culture through heritage sports activities, enhancing their own cohesion but also integrated heritage sports with economic domains through comprehensive cultural exchange platforms like the 'Martial Arts Summit.' Consequently, heritage sports have become a catalyst in three domains: cultural, social, and economic, fostering a sense of 'we are one family' among heterogeneous and homogeneous individuals (organizations) both internally and externally.

### 7.3. Transition from Governmental Governance to Social Integration in the Co-Governance of Heritage Sports

The author believes that in the process of heritage sports participating in rural governance, it is crucial to first clarify the relationships among the government, society, and villagers. In essence, rural governance encompasses government governance and rural self-governance. From the local autonomy led by clan leaders, gentry, or elites in feudal society to the direct interventions in village politics, economics, and culture under the New County System during the Republic of China era, and further transition from the People's Commune system established after the founding of the People's Republic of China towards rural governance, eventually establishing a model of rural self-

governance with grassroots democracy at its core and the villagers' committee as the organizational form.

Regarding government governance, the prevalent form is 'power-based' governance, which can exert significant pressure on society. In terms of rural self-governance, in traditional societies, maintaining social order relied on long-term accumulated and customary 'habits' or 'rituals.' When appropriately employed, these customs play a vital and irreplaceable role in upholding village order. Heritage sports culture, serving as a governance tool for communication, emotional bonding, and social cohesion in traditional societies, offers flexible social spaces for rural governance. It constitutes collective actions that impose behavioral constraints and norms, forming universal social norms.

In Fujian's L village, the returning elite LLS collaborated with L village clan association member LFY (pseudonym) to diligently establish the Songjiang Formation team, commencing the revival of Songjiang Formation culture. With government support, L village established the Songjiang Formation Cultural Research Association and Martial Arts Association (referred to as 'Songwu Club') in 2010 and 2011, respectively, forming their own grassroots organizations, both presided over by LLS. The members of the Songjiang Formation team in L village, under the 'Songwu Club,' engage in daily Songjiang Formation practices. Through long-term cooperative exchanges, villagers, who usually lack communication, develop mutual trust, fostering a sense of collective identity, responsibility, and honor. It is evident that grassroots sports organizations like the 'Songwu Club,' through villagers' participation in various public welfare activities related to Songjiang Formation, have achieved collaborative and resilient rural governance practices, facilitating the emergence of internal order within the village.

Overall, the primary reason for the disorder in the current rural governance field is the mutual contestation between the internal order and external institutions. On the one hand, there is a gradual rise in the external institutional governance of the government under the 'rule of law.' On the other hand, the internal order dynamics of rural autonomy are gradually weakening under 'moral governance.' Clearly, relying solely on the government or villagers for rural governance has its limitations. The post-rural China governance order is gradually transitioning from a local order to a legal and ritual order. However, the positions of 'law' and 'ritual' in the rural governance order warrant closer attention and resolution.

After the government intervened in the revival of Songjiang Formation culture in the village, the core traditional heritage sports of Songjiang Formation were preserved. During the process of holding the 'Martial Arts Assembly,' the heritage activities such as the ritual of 'parading' to worship gods and ancestors, as well as pre-event activities like 'combat formation,' were also preserved. Moreover, certain forms and content in line with the official ideology (such as opening ceremonies) were added, facilitating the transformation of village education and cultural identity carried by Songjiang Formation toward local government governance practices. It is evident that the local government exercises comprehensive coordination, integrates various resources, and mobilizes diverse forces in public administration, guiding active social participation. This ensures the maximization of public service benefits related to heritage sports and secures the interests of governance. Local government is thus the core entity in the governance of heritage sports, playing a steering role by directing the overall process.

Civil society organizations ('Song Martial Arts Association,' etc.) have accomplished the cultural identification of homogenous individuals with Songjiang Formation culture through the establishment of 'Elderly Homes,' 'Songjiang Formation Campus Outreach,' adult participation in village public affairs, and other public welfare activities. They have integrated it as their own value criteria and behavioral norms, forming a network of reciprocal normative value relationships based on mutual trust. Faced with issues of cultural fragmentation and backwardness in the transmission of homogenous heritage among older Songjiang Formation members, they have strengthened exchanges with the outside based on business and interest-related heterogeneous social capital relationships. This has led to the innovative reproduction of Songjiang Formation formation on existing foundations. They have maintained close collaboration with heterogeneous entities like government and research institutes to facilitate the sharing of information resources. Grassroots civil society organizations have broken the single top-down rural governance model, allowing social forces direct involvement in the development of heritage sports, fostering rural social harmony and development. Additionally, the formation of civil society organizations is advantageous for villagers' substantive participation in local affairs, better implementing their right to information and decision-making. By creating social intermediary groups where homogeneous and heterogeneous organizations coexist (civil society organizations), interactive spheres between internal and external society are formed, generating universal reciprocal normative values.

To achieve profitable transformation and innovative development through Songjiang Formation culture, Fujian's L Village adopted a development strategy of 'going out and inviting in.' In the existing system and social environment, the market is an indispensable and significant actor in the rural governance process involving heritage sports. It serves as a platform for the implementation of policies and resource allocation by the government in rural governance. It also provides non-governmental organizations with legitimate spaces for autonomous governance and developmental methods in heritage sports governance. This facilitates reciprocal governance processes between the government and social organizations. In summary, heritage sports, as a highly socially connected cultural activity, construct a transmission where the subject and object of 'people' are unified in the process of participating in rural governance. Employing a 'small government, extensive service' approach by the government and non-governmental autonomous 'dual-track' governance mode involving various levels of public participation, heritage sports act as a mediator platform. This forms a multifaceted landscape of governance involving the government, social organizations, and the market in rural governance, promoting mutual coordination and symbiosis between governing subjects and objects.

## 8. Conclusion

The outstanding traditional culture of China is the crystallization of Chinese civilization's wisdom. Properly inheriting and utilizing culture is a profound support for the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. Rural areas, with their vast territories, harbor rich heritage sports culture, which has undergone intergenerational transmission through blood relations, mentorship, military influence, educational institutions, geographical affinity, and common interests. This has resulted in rural social orders characterized by 'ritual governance' and 'virtuous governance' during traditional times, playing significant historical roles in the governance process. However, facing rapid modernization, intergenerational conflicts have marginalized

heritage sports, leading to severe disruption in their transmission, even facing a crisis of succession. Heritage sports, as an informal system, played a crucial historical role in the governance process of traditional societies and accumulated rich experience in social governance. We should not entirely discard the invaluable 'wealth' accumulated by previous generations. Instead, we ought to reassess significance to heritage sports in this era, coexisting and interacting with modern rural governance. This can be achieved through the dual reconstruction of physical and moral aspects, establishing an effective connection with rural governance. In the new era, with the transition of traditional rural governance models such as top-down 'official governance' and the dominant 'ritual governance' and 'virtuous governance', the involvement of heritage sports in rural governance should move towards a more youthful, scientific, and mutually beneficial multi-governance model. Within the 'dual-track system' where the government leads service enhancement and non-governmental organizations lead normative competition, it shapes a pattern of rural integrated governance, where villagers actively participate in practical governance as key actors.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (RECUiTM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

### **Acknowledgement**

Part of this article was extracted from a doctoral thesis that will be submitted to Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).

### **Funding**

The authors received financial support from the Fujian Provincial Social Science Foundation Project (No.: FJ2023B013) during the research, writing, and/or publication of this article.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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