

Stakeholder Conflicts and Labor Alienation in ICH Commodification: The Case of Zhuang Brocade

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KEYWORDS:

Zhuang Brocade
Intangible Cultural Heritage
Socio-Ecological System
Labor Alienation
Stakeholders

CITATION:

Huang, J., Mumtaz, M., & Zhang, X. (2026). Stakeholder Conflicts and Labor Alienation in ICH Commodification: The Case of Zhuang Brocade. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(9), e004117. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i9.4117>

ABSTRACT

With the twin pressures of modern commercial logic and digital technological rationality, the transmission of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is in a dichotomy between 'authenticity preservation' and 'market survival'. Taking the traditional Chinese intangible cultural heritage Zhuang Brocade as an example, this study presents both the Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) model and stakeholder theory. In combination with semi-structured interviews and NVivo 15 qualitative analysis, it analyses the cognitive fragmentation and stakeholder conflicts in the world of five major stakeholder groups that all have different ecological roles: grassroots weavers, core inheritors, enterprise managers, university scholars, and digital designers in the current process of transformation. In particular, it finds: First, in the evolution of the resource system, the shift away from traditional handicrafts and towards mass production has caused a deep ontological crisis in the artisans. Second, in the process of symbolic meaning, the elite class is dominating the aesthetic reconstruction of traditional patterns and the masses of people become so alienated from production on an assembly line and lose their meaning. Third, at the macro-governance level, policy dividends are severely intercepted at the upper levels, failing to produce an effective trickle-down effect, which leaves traditional artisans mired in micro-level livelihood dilemmas and intergenerational transmission ruptures. From a micro-empirical perspective, this study enriches the cutting-edge theoretical debates on heritage commodification and cultural labor alienation, and provides actionable policy implications for balancing the commercial vitality of cultural heritage with the subjectivity of grassroots laborers.

1. Introduction

Zhuang Brocade is one of the four famous brocades in China and is the material and symbolic embodiment of the traditional weaving techniques of Zhuang people's ethnic group and the most symbolic system of national historical memory, cosmology, and place (Tan et al., 2018). With the rise of cultural tourism and the implementation of national intangible cultural heritage protection programs in recent years, Zhuang Brocade has transformed from a rural, self-supportive rural life to the new consumer market (Cominelli & Greffe, 2012). However, this cultural change in the cross-contextual context is not so much a natural process to be taken in a natural way, but an ecological shift with power shifts, capital restructuring, and value conflicts.

At the present time, Zhuang Brocade is experiencing serious structural tensions in the industrialization process. To meet the needs of the massive tourism market, mechanical jacquard looms and modern chemical textile materials have been introduced on a large scale. As Su (2019) pointed out in his research on Chinese ICH tourism, although technological intervention has greatly promoted the circulation of cultural products, this "revival" dominated by external capital and technical elites is rapidly stripping away the original handcrafted texture of the heritage and its rural context deeply rooted in the culture. Within this ecosystem, the right to interpret "what authentic Zhuang Brocade is" and "how Zhuang Brocade should develop" is undergoing a profound transformation (Zhu, 2015). Existing research mostly focuses on macro-level industrial policy analysis or single digital design perspectives, and rarely delves into the internal operating mechanisms of cultural production to examine the real needs, cognitive conflicts, and micro-level survival dilemmas of different stakeholder groups in daily practice.

1.1. Research Objectives and Questions

To fill the aforementioned research gaps, this study aims to systematically diagnose the deep-seated ecological dilemmas faced by contemporary Zhuang Brocade in the process of transmission and innovation from the micro-perspective of multiple stakeholders. Specifically, through in-depth field interviews and qualitative coding, this study seeks to deconstruct the structural tension between traditional craftsmanship and modern commercial logic, and reveal the hindrance effects of macro-level policies at the micro-implementation level.

Centering on this overall objective, this study proposes the following three core research questions (RQs):

RQ1: In the transmission process of the Zhuang Brocade resource system, how do different stakeholders perceive and respond to the modern transformation of technological means (mechanical vs. manual) and material inputs?

RQ2: In the process of catering to the modern consumer market, how do elite groups reconstruct the symbolic meaning of Zhuang Brocade? What kind of alienation effect does this reconstruction have on the cultural cognition and identity of grassroots workers?

RQ3: In the current Zhuang Brocade ecosystem, what are the disconnects and negotiation dynamics when macro-governance structures and policy funding support are transmitted to the livelihood level of micro-artisans?

2. Literature Review

To better understand the complex interactions in the Zhuang Brocade cultural ecosystem, we have therefore drawn on the intersecting perspectives of the following four core theoretical dimensions.

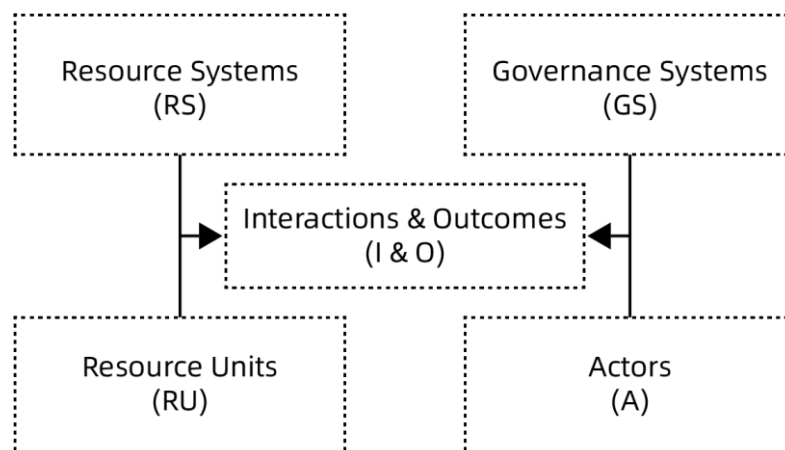
2.1 The Contemporary Evolution of the "Authenticity-Commodification" Paradox in ICH

In contemporary tourism anthropology and cultural heritage studies, the conflict between "authenticity" and "commodification" has shifted from static preservation debates to a dynamic constructivist perspective. Zhu (2012), in his study of Chinese heritage tourism, highlights that "authenticity" is no longer a fixed and objective property, but a social construct that is constantly negotiated and performed by different actors in the tourism economy. Alivizatou (2012) correctly points out that when intangible cultural heritage is incorporated into capital accumulation, the most fundamental community-sharing attributes will become useless through standardized reproduction. This "hollowing-out effect" tends to render complex cultural objects into visual symbols that can be read easily by tourists and thus strip away the cultural beliefs in the heritage. With this new perspective, we consider the aesthetic reconstruction of Zhuang Brocade patterns as a commercial experience.

2.2 Cutting-edge Applications of the Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) Framework in Heritage Studies

In recent years, the Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) framework has become well established in the governance analysis of cultural heritage and sustainable tourism (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). McGinnis and Ostrom (2014) made major changes to the early SES framework to emphasise the effect of information asymmetry and power networks among actors in the system on system resilience. Partelow (2018) also highlighted in a systematic review of the SES framework that it can simultaneously be used to analyse resource replacement at the material level and gaming dynamics at the institutional level. In the context of ICH, the SES framework is a very good approach to analyze the relationship between Zhuang Brocade's material carrier changes (machinery replacing hand-making) and the conflict of different stakeholder levels (Herrero-Jáuregui et al., 2018).

Figure 1: The socio-ecological framework



2.3 Craft Labor and the Critique of Alienation in the Creative Economy

The impact of modern digital technology and industrial production on traditional handicrafts has triggered a new labor crisis in the context of the current "creative economy." Luckman (2015) points out that beneath the surface of the global craft revival, the labor value of artisans has been severely marginalized. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), in critiquing labor in cultural industries, note that capitalism not only exploits the surplus value of cultural workers but also deprives them of their autonomy and sense of meaning in the creative process. Jakob (2013) further notes that on the so-called innovative craft assembly lines, grassroots artisans are experiencing profound "deskilling and spiritual alienation." This study aims to introduce this contemporary critique of alienation into the context of ICH workshops, deeply analyzing the psychological state of grassroots weavers after losing the right to interpret symbols.

2.4 Micro-level Stakeholder Game in the Heritage Domain

In recent years, stakeholder theory in tourism and heritage management has been increasingly applied to an understanding of hidden power struggles among different actors. Waligo et al. (2013) suggested that obstacles to the implementation of sustainable tourism are often due to the conflict of utility interests between stakeholders. Harrison and Wicks (2013) posit that the 'utility' of the system includes not only tangible economic benefits but also intangible discursive power and cultural capital. Local governments, entrepreneurs, academic experts, inheritors, and grassroots weavers constitute a much more diverse group in the Zhuang Brocade protection network (Nicholas et al., 2010; Suntikul & Jachna, 2012). Because of extreme asymmetries in knowledge and power, understanding the different logics these actors use through cultural commodification is vital to identifying bottlenecks in system development.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Qualitative Research Design

Because this study aims to investigate complex subjective experiential phenomena such as human cognition, emotion, and power games, we adopt an exploratory qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The goal is to restore the real situations and meaning-making processes of various actors in the ICH ecosystem through in-depth textual data.

3.2 Purposive Sampling of Research Subjects

This study used purposive sampling and snowball sampling as a method to achieve the same objective. In order to sample the different power points in the Zhuang Brocade ecosystem, the researchers selected five very representative individuals in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region:

Expert A: A grassroots weaving master (the only physical worker who is responsible for the manufacturing).

Expert B: The head of a Zhuang Brocade factory (the capital holder who controls market resources and is responsible for commercialization).

Expert C: The seventh-generation core inheritor (the spiritual leader who protects culture).

Expert D / E: A university scholar and a digital designer (the macro-level think tank who is leading symbol deconstruction and digital innovation).

3.3 In-depth Interviews and Data Collection

The data was gathered mainly in semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guide covered a range of topics including perception of technological change, attitude towards commercialization and the influence of policies. In order to reduce defensive responses, all interviews were conducted in the respondents' natural working environments (weaving workshops, offices, etc.). Once informed consent was obtained, interviews were audio-recorded and in total the raw text data was recorded for nearly 60,000 Chinese characters.

3.4 Thematic Coding Analysis Based on NVivo 15

All textual data were imported into the professional qualitative analysis software NVivo 15 for systematic processing, which has a significant rigor advantage when dealing with multi-subject textual data (Woods et al., 2016). The analysis is consistent with the thematic analysis method used by Nowell et al. (2017). Two researchers independently and iteratively conducted bottom-up open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2015). Ultimately, three core parent nodes and 13 child nodes were extracted (see Table 1).

Table 1: Matrix Coding Query of Core Nodes across Key Stakeholders

Main Themes & Core Nodes	Expert A (Weaver)	Expert B (Director)	Expert C (Inheritor)	Expert D (Scholar)	Expert E (Designer)
Succession of Resource Systems					
Cost & Popularization Advantages of Modern Industrial Textile Materials	1	2	1	5	3
Popularization and Application of Mechanized Mass Production	1	2	4	5	0
Intervention of Digital Technology in Assisted Design	0	2	0	4	5

Main Themes & Core Nodes	Expert A (Weaver)	Expert B (Director)	Expert C (Inheritor)	Expert D (Scholar)	Expert E (Designer)
Persistence of Traditional Handcrafts and Efficiency Dilemma	3	3	5	2	0
Decline of Traditional Natural Materials and Intergenerational Crisis	3	6	4	1	0
Differentiation of Symbolic Meaning					
Structural Disconnect Between Craft Practice and Cultural Perception	5	1	1	0	0
Assembly-Line Labor and Alienating Experience of Frontline Workers	6	0	0	0	0
Reconstruction and Innovation of Symbols Based on Modern Aesthetics	3	3	1	2	4
Expansion of Contexts and Derivation of Meaning Driven by Commercial Interests	0	2	0	3	3
Governance Structures and the Struggle for Survival					
Exodus of Youth and Intergenerational Discontinuity Amid Economic Constraints	3	1	1	0	2

4.1 Succession of Resource Systems: The Expansion of Machine Rationality and the Ontological Anxiety of Handcrafting

At the material level of the socio-ecological system, the succession of the resource system is the first domino that brings about the transformation of the entire network. The whole penetration of modern digital technology and mechanized tools has completely transformed Zhuang Brocade's production techniques and material. The word frequency query and visualization analysis of all interview records (see Figure 3) is a testament to this deep-seated tension.

Figure 3: Word cloud of high-frequency words



On the visual side of the word cloud, on the one hand, terms such as Zhuang Brocade, tradition, weaving, and patterns are still at the core of the text. If we translate this to the context of the visual level, the cultural anchor and ontological identity of the ecosystem, whether high-level elites or grassroots weavers, is still rooted in the traditional handicraft context. On the other hand, these are the discourses of the modern market: development, innovation, products, and even AI as a cutting-edge digital technology which are still at the top of the visual graph. And the interplay and clash of old language and new vocabulary in the visual presentation perfectly describes the structural disjunction of Zhuang Brocade's current succession of resources too: a tug-of-war between 'clinging to traditional ontology' and 'expanding machine rationality' is going on in the ecosystem.

4.1.1 Embracing Industrialization: Cost, Efficiency, and Design Empowerment

In the upper-level elites who control market and technical resources (scholars, designers, factory directors) have an optimistic view of this industrialization-oriented resource succession. The "inefficiency of traditional handcraft techniques" is the fatal bottleneck to Zhuang Brocade's industrialization and mass popularization, they point out. On the subject of "Cost & Popularization Advantages of Modern Industrial Textile Materials" and "Intervention of Digital Technology in Assisted Design" the university scholars (Experts D and E) contributed most in the forum:

"The introduction of modern jacquard looms and digital CAD design has changed the production landscape in a fundamental way. In the past, with traditional bamboo cage looms, even the most talented weaver could only

make about 20 centimeters of complex patterns a day and work to exhaustion. Today, designers create models on the computer and input the programs, and mechanized looms can instantly achieve mass production. Even more importantly, the substitution of materials - previously using pure natural mulberry silk and hand-dyed cotton yarn was too costly; now the entire array of polyester and rayon has led to a tenth of the cost savings. Only in this way can machine-woven brocade truly enter thousands of households and achieve the 'living transmission' of intangible cultural heritage." (Expert E, University Scholar/Digital Designer).

The enterprise manager (Expert B) is also very supportive of this technical transition. He believes that "machines replacing handcrafting" are the only way to cope with huge market orders and standardization requirements: "Tourism consumers don't care if it was woven on a bamboo cage loom; they care about bright colors, low prices, and no pilling. Machines will solve the quality control problem."

4.1.2 Ontological Anxiety: The Demise and Persistence of Traditional Texture

But this technological replacement justified in the name of "efficiency" and "standardization" has been met with strong resistance in the traditional system. For the core inheritor (Expert C), traditional handcrafting is not a sign of backward productive forces but an ontological proof of cultural authenticity. Expert C took a very defensive cultural posture at the node of "Persistence of Traditional Handcrafts and Efficiency Dilemma":

"Because the market is now heavily commercialised, with a plethora of e-commerce live streams and a vast array of machine-produced fabrics available online; whereas prices used to be over 200 or 300 yuan per metre, you can now find them selling for as little as a few dozen yuan per metre. That's why I've decided I want to return to the way things used to be. This year, I intend to revert to the traditional craftsmanship and materials of the older generation. I've made up my mind to gradually build this up as a traditional craft, starting right from the beginning with the dyes and how to twist the cotton. Even if I don't have the cotton to twist myself, I'll buy cotton yarn and dye it myself, then take full responsibility for the materials before weaving them. That's what I plan to do over the coming year: return to my hometown to pursue this work." (Expert C, 7th generation Core Inheritor)

The two opposing stories illustrate a fundamental, irreconcilable contradiction in resource succession: while modern technology has brought Zhuang Brocade to a record market share and economies of scale, it has also stripped its inner soul at the fabric level. The inheritor's "seclusive persistence" is essentially a helpless act of cultural self-salvation in the face of increasing machine rationality.

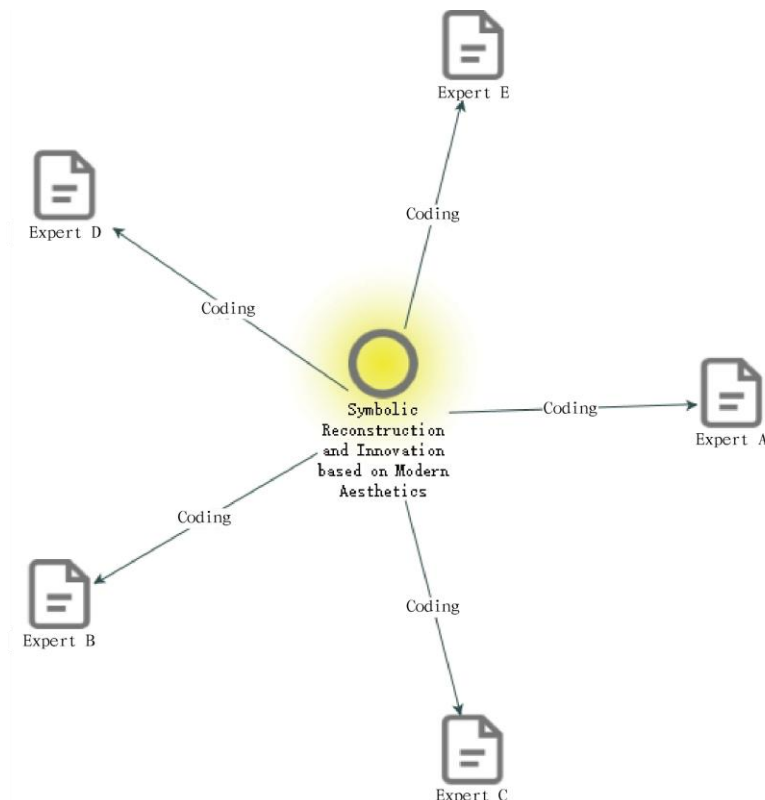
4.2 Differentiation of Symbolic Meaning: Elite-Led Reconstruction and Structural Alienation of Grassroots Labor

The totemic symbols Zhuang Brocade carries in his mind as a core resource unit are under severe semantic deconstruction by commercial interests.

4.2.1 Complicity in Aesthetic Reconstruction and the Evolution of Meaning

On the issue of “Reconstruction and Innovation of Symbols Based on Modern Aesthetics,” all five stakeholders are intimately involved (see Figure 4), and, quite surprisingly, there is some sort of cross-level consensus. And as traditional Zhuang Brocade colors are too intense and so different from each other, and its totems are often linked to ancient sorcery or clan fertility worship, bringing them to the contemporary urban consumer market would be a very “cultural discount.”

Figure 4: Symbol reconstruction diagram



University scholars and enterprise managers regard this symbolic reconstruction as the core of cultural creative product development:

"Actually, in our part of the world, there are fewer traditional patterns than modern ones, because after so many years of continuous design and practice, the patterns we design now are far more varied and numerous than before. Back then, they didn't have computers for design like we do now, did they? People simply had templates, which were passed down from one generation to the next. Back then, these templates were merely handed down from the older generation to the younger one. There weren't as many diverse working methods as there are today, nor were there as many pattern options to pass on; that's how I see it. At the same time, we would design according to the customer's requirements, which would result in a pattern with a distinct theme, wouldn't it? For example, if I wanted to weave a design featuring the character for 'fortune' (Fu), we'd design one with that character; there are also designs featuring the character for 'longevity' (Shou), aren't there? We can design patterns based on themes such as fortune, prosperity, longevity and happiness, as well as create landscape paintings. So, modern designers are constantly learning and creating more and more design patterns; there's such a rich variety now that you can create whatever you like." (Expert B, Enterprise Director). This reconstruction is

essentially a typical construction of “staged authenticity.” By taking the original sacred meanings and grafting them onto secular consumerism, the elite class completes the semantic evolution of Zhuang Brocade from a “ritual sacred object” to a “tourism commodity.”

4.2.2 Grassroots Data Vacuum: Marxist Alienation on the Assembly Line

But instead of the “intellectual carnival” that is so fully engaged in aesthetic innovation above, workers at the grassroots execution level are voiceless and starving. As shown in the NVivo matrix (Table 1), on the first node of “Assembly-Line Labor and Alienating Experience of Frontline Workers” the grassroots manual weaver (Expert A) had as many as 6 reference points, and the attention of management (director), academic elites (scholars, designers), and macro-level inheritor were all zero.

This chilling “data vacuum” shows the cruel reality of present ICH workshops: cultural innovation and commercial dividends are monopolized by the top elites and cultural alienation and physical fatigue are entirely transferred to and borne by the grassroots workers. Expert A of the interview described the mental anguish of losing the right to cultural interpretation:

“The experts and bosses give us blueprints and tell us how to weave and we just follow them. We don’t even know about culture; we’ve only learned the mechanical skill of weaving. I don’t know what those animal totems actually represent, and why they changed them to these light colors. The people who really know what is true in this industry don’t weave, and the ones who actually weave don’t know what’s true. So we sit there all the time, hands and feet never stopping, we’re like emotionless robots. From morning to night, my back hurts so much I can’t stand straight and my eyes get blurry. Sometimes I look at the patterns I’ve woven and I ask myself: What are we doing all this for? It seems like this piece of cloth has nothing to do with me.” (Expert A, Grassroots Weaver)

This testimony powerfully confirms the classic phenomenon of labor alienation on modern cultural creative assembly lines: weavers weave exquisite ethnic symbols at the cost of their health but on a spiritual level they are very distant from the cultural products they produce. They are not producers of cultural meaning but of “industrial flesh and blood” driven by blueprints, piece-rate wages and machine rhythms. So there is a total structural rupture between “technical practice” and “cultural cognition.”

4.3 Governance Structures and the Struggle for Survival: Disconnect Between Macro-Policy Path Dependence and Micro-Livelihoods

In the governance system dimension of the SES framework, the generous policy dividends and financial support provided by central and local governments for ICH are a clear “hierarchical blockage effect” in the system.

4.3.1 Policy Capture and Subsidy Dependence at the Capital Level

At the enterprise and capital level, there is a clear pattern of high policy capture and path dependence on government support. At the point of “Deep Dependence on ICH

Policy Support and Funding,” the factory director (Expert B) articulated his demands 7 times, far beyond any other topic:

“To be honest, the profit from selling these brocade cultural creative products on the market is very thin. The main reason a large factory like ours can sustain operations is due to the ICH support funds provided by the government. We use these funds to apply for various projects, participate in major cultural trade fairs in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, and even built a very beautiful 'Zhuang Brocade ICH Experience Pavilion' inside the factory to host official visits and study tours. Without this macro-level policy capital injection, an enterprise like ours could go bankrupt at any time.” (Expert B, Enterprise Director)

This indicates that the current industrialization of ICH is largely a “policy-driven prosperity.” Funds flow mostly to the mid-to-upper reaches of the industrial chain for “vanity projects” such as exhibition halls, brand packaging, and public relations marketing.

4.3.2 The Failure of the “Trickle-Down Effect” and Grassroots Livelihood Dilemmas

From the luxurious exhibition halls to the looms, it is not difficult to see that macro-level funds have not been able to produce a “trickle-down effect” for the grassroots. In the face of the “Economic Dilemma Facing Complex Traditional Crafts,” the feeling of powerlessness at the grassroots is particularly strong:

“And no matter how many subsidies the state gives us in the news, grassroots weavers who sit on the looms have never received a government subsidy. The boss gives us piece-rate wages. If it is only a machine-woven pattern we can weave over twenty centimeters a day; if we need to employ the most traditional and complex ‘pick-weaving’ technique I can’t even weave 10 centimeters a day. The wages are pitifully low because it’s time consuming and it’s painful to look at. Young people today would rather go out to work in factories, or deliver food, for this little money— they are not ready to learn this art or even to suffer this pain anymore. When we can no longer make our old bones work, this craft will go extinct.” (Expert A, Grassroots Weaver)

This sigh exposes a fatal flaw in the ICH governance system: the absolute value system of “piece-rate wage” based on capitalist logic does not cover the huge time cost and cultural value of pure handmaking. This absolute livelihood problem at the micro-level ultimately leads directly to the “Exodus of Youth and Intergenerational Discontinuity Amid Economic Constraints.” If the national discourse on ICH transmission does not translate into material guarantees for grassroots artisans to live a dignified life, the whole cultural ecosystem, in its superficial prosperity, quietly watches the collapse of its core skill system.

5. Discussion

This study reviews the three research questions proposed in the introduction (RQ1-RQ3) and builds on the current state-of-the-art theories with multi-level empirical evidence.

In the context of Socio-Ecological Systems (SES) (McGinnis & Ostrom, 2014), this study shows the “masking effect” of modern machinery and industrial material on cultural authenticity in an especially profound way. The replacement of tools is not value neutral; the addition of jacquard looms quietly diminishes Zhuang Brocade’s tactile texture and cultural warmth. This confirms Alivizatou’s (2012) observation that capital’s obsession with efficiency logic often trumps the sacredness and ontological identity of cultural heritage in the local environment.

The extreme alienation data (6 versus 0) provide strong empirical evidence from an ICH workshop for the “creative labor theory” (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). While most previous research has concentrated on the external distortion of cultural meaning by the tourism industry (Zhu, 2012), this study shows that the most severe cultural deprivation occurs at the production process itself. Elite designers take over the aesthetic transformation while grassroots weavers are totally denied the opportunity to participate in cultural interpretation and are reduced to tools on an assembly line (Jakob, 2013). The cruel claim that “Those who understand the meaning do not weave and those who truly weave do not understand the meaning” is the hardest ethical paradox in the current commodification of ICH.

In governance systems, there are power imbalances between different stakeholders and macro-policy dividends are systematically ignored at the top level, fulfilling the stakeholder bargaining logic proposed by Harrison and Wicks (2013). Such a governance model without the direct micro-economic feedback mechanism (such as premium compensation) would become an unsustainable ecological model based on the use of cheap labor to mask macro-level prosperity (Waligo et al., 2013), resulting in irreversible intergenerational transmission rupture.

6. Conclusion

The transformation of Zhuang Brocade from a local handicraft to market-oriented commodity is a delicate ecological reconstruction process that is deeply intertwined with capital and power. Structural rifts exist between commercial vitality and cultural authenticity and between elite narratives and grassroots demands. To save the endangered pure handicraft community, the following intervention recommendations are made.

Reinforcing Grassroots Economic Incentive Mechanisms: The government should explore creating a targeted subsidy system which is about “cultural value addition” and not just the cold “piece-rate wage system” based on capital logic. Direct subsidies that are not at the enterprise level (e.g., “pick-weaving”) should be provided for pure manual techniques.

Cultural Empowerment for Workers: In symbolic reconstruction, enterprises and academic institutions must close the cognitive gap experienced by grassroots laborers through cultural popularization and reverse participatory design, to restore their professional dignity as cultural creators.

Increasing Tiered Ecological Governance of Authenticity and Commercialization: Though large-scale mechanized products can be marketed with the aim of mass consumption, core protection zones must be established by law. The “original Zhuang Brocade” should

be thoroughly certified, and it should be based on natural materials in order for the development of cultural resources to be in a different way.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly private and confidential. They were also informed that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict 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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